A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
HOW THE TERROR BEGAN!

HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
MORE FIRE, MORE BLOOD

SFX

EXCLUSIVE!

LET'S HEAR IT FOR...

THE BOYS

IS VOUGHT'S TIME FINALLY UP?

DOCTOR WHO
ON SET WITH BONNIE LANGFORD

MAXXXINE
TI WEST'S TRILOGY CONCLUDES

SUPACELL
POWER TO THE PEOPLE

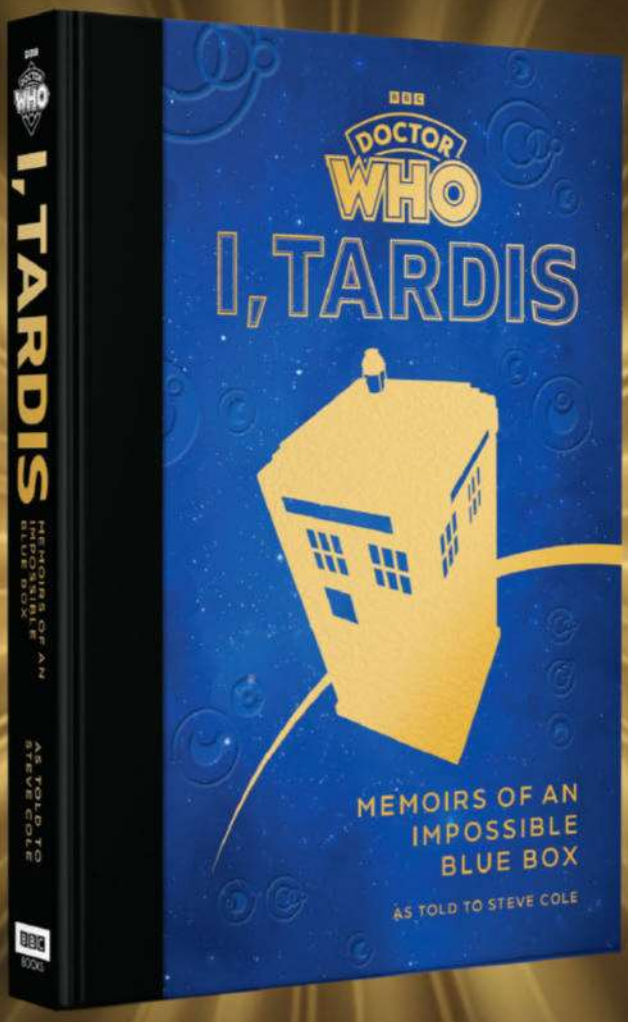
LONGLEGS
NIC CAGE'S NEW HORROR FILM

PLUS! THE WATCHED / SECRET WARS / WILLIAM SHATNER / RESIDENT ALIEN / SUNNY / X-MEN / ANANSI BOYS / 2000 AD / THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

FUTURE
ISSUE 380 JULY 2024 PRINTED IN THE UK

BBC DOCTOR WHO

I, TARDIS



MEMOIRS OF AN IMPOSSIBLE BLUE BOX

SCAN ME

DOCTOR WHO logo™ & © BBC 1973

SUBSCRIBE NOW & SAVE!
Head to page 23 for details

FEATURES

24 THE BOYS
They're back – and spitting in the face of superhero fatigue.

32 HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
GRRM's fairytale returns for season two.

38 A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
Hush, hush, whisper who dares...

42 SUPACELL
South Londoners assemble in this superpowered series.

52 LONGLEGS
Osgood Perkins knows where the bodies are buried.

56 DOCTOR WHO
The Hot Who Show's very own Bonnie Langford!

66 THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT
It was page 76 before you went back in time, clumsyboots.

RED ALERT

6 THE WATCHED
There's a family twist to the new Shyamalan.

8 SECRET WARS AT 40
Celebrating the big bang of cosmic crossovers.

10 WILLIAM SHATNER
Shat's life. Shat's entertainment.

16 X-MEN
Yet another evolution for Marvel's mutants.

19 THE BOUNDS
Folk horror live on stage. Think of the crops!

REVIEWS

74 FURIOSA
Who needs Mad Max when we have Addled Anya?

78 STAR TREK: DISCOVERY
We're heading to the Disco one last time.

80 THE FLESH & BLOOD SHOW
Nice and sleazy does it with the best of Pete Walker.

86 NAVOLA
Paolo Bacigalupi stares into the eye of the dragon.

92 THE BAT-MAN: FIRST KNIGHT
Gotham's finest gets Bat to basics.

94 SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II
You have permission to run with sharp objects.

REGULARS

96 BLASTERMIND
Splendid fellows, all of them.

98 TOTAL RECALL
Party like it's *Space: 1999*!

Captain's Log

Bless me, fellow nerds, for I have sinned. I admit that I am quite literally bingeing *Gen V* in the final days of this issue being put together. When I read Jack Shepherd's great cover feature for season four of *The Boys*, I realised the superhero spin-off series was still stuck on one of my numerous watchlists. This is the problem with being blessed with so many genre options. My shelves are groaning with sealed discs, unread books and new comics – sometimes things gather virtual dust on whatever streamer I've pressed the "add" button on (usually) late at night.

That said – I'm now lucky enough to have eight "new" episodes from Godolkin University, with season four of *The Boys* lined up on a secure journalist preview site. I'm going to feast on Vought entertainment this bank holiday weekend! So every cloud...

Elsewhere in this issue, I was on set for the SUPER SECRET finale of *Doctor Who* season one. My lips are sealed! Mostly because it happened a year ago, so I'll have to re-read my frantically scribbled notes before it reaches these pages next issue. For now you'll have to guess where we were sitting when I interviewed National Treasure Bonnie Langford about her return to the show. I *adore* Bonnie. I first interviewed her, alongside Sandi Toksvig, when they were touring together in 2007. Sandi held court on the sofa in their dressing room while Bonnie ironed their costumes behind her. She's pure showbiz and an absolute delight!

Darren
X

Get in touch!

Email
sfx@futurenet.com

Facebook
facebook.com/SFXmagazine

X/Instagram
Follow @sfxmagazine and tag us!

© BBC

Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Absolutely loving season two of *Interview With The Vampire*. Gorgeous.
→ Blimey, "73 Yards" was incredible. As for "Dot And Bubble"... Oh my.
→ What a lovely ending for *Star Trek: Discovery*. Genuinely sad to see it go.

RANTS

→ Glad that *The Walking Dead* spin-offs have found a UK home with Sky – but no *Fear* or *Tales*?

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ Delighted that Kevin Jon Davies is following up his Douglas Adams book *42* with a companion volume centred on *Hitchhiker's* TV series scripts: bit.ly/hitchhikersbook.
→ I can't think of a better choice to move the *Exorcist* franchise on than Mike Flanagan.
→ My *X-Files* rewatch has hit season three, and the advent of Darin Morgan has lifted the show *so* much.

RIP

→ Saddened by Roger Corman's passing. I interviewed him back in 2008. We've now put that feature online: bit.ly/cormanheroes.
→ Free streaming service Plex has put together a collection of over 100 Corman productions (see bit.ly/cormanplex). I particularly recommend *The Intruder*, *The Premature Burial* and *The Shooting*.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Another excellent season of *Outer Range*, although once again season two threw up so many more questions than it answered. Hoping season three is on the way!

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ As I write this, David Lynch is personally teasing some sort of reveal for 5 June. So I hope to be a happy bunny next issue...

RAVES

→ *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II* was incredible to look at. Pity they forgot the gameplay.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR-AT-LARGE

RAVES

→ Loved "73 Yards". *Doctor Who* at its most disquieting. Kudos to Millie Gibson for taking the lead with such a compelling performance. *The Ruby Sunday Adventures*, anyone?
→ Check out Janet Ellis's podcast *Twice Upon A Time*, where guests chat about treasured childhood books, including some spooky choices from Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ The last season of *Evil* is really bringing the chills while also smartly exposing society's current ills.
→ If you never got on the *Sweet Tooth* train then – toot, toot! – all aboard, because all three seasons are now available on Netflix. It's dark, it's beautiful and it's got Bobby the human-groundhog hybrid. You will thank me.

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

JULY 2024

NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// MUTIES!

10

THIS IS THE CAPTAIN SPEAKING

William Shatner on his documentary *You Can Call Me Bill*

Highlights

8
SECRET WARS
Celebrating 40 years of Marvel's superhero slugfest on Battleworld with a reprint.

14
SUNNY
Novel *The Dark Manual* gets the live-action treatment courtesy of Apple TV+.

20
DOCTOR WHO
Fifteen and Ruby take on the Cybermen in a brand new comic strip adventure.

DIRECTOR EXCLUSIVE

A Watched Plot

Director Ishana Night Shyamalan heads into the woods for her spooky feature film **The Watched**

WORDS: **STUART MANNING**

"MY DAD GAVE ME SOME GREAT advice. He said, 'Pick the thing that feels like an endless well – something you would never tire of going deeper into.'"

As the daughter of *The Sixth Sense* director M Night Shyamalan, Ishana Night Shyamalan is aware that her surname brings a weight of expectation. Her debut feature *The Watched*, adapted from Irish writer AM Shine's folklore-flavoured chiller *The Watchers*, is produced by her father and brings his mentorship full circle. "My whole technique has come from watching him and talking with him about his processes," she begins. "I think the main thing I've taken away is seeing his emotional resilience. He is a relentless worker. He does not stop. That's been the greatest inspiration to me."

Ishana cut her directorial teeth shooting second unit work on her father's movies *Old* and *Knock At The Cabin*, graduating to writer and director on episodes of his Apple TV+ series *Servant*. She was looking for a feature project when she was given the novel, finding in it her elusive endless well. "It had all the elements that I was interested in playing with," she says. "It's about a young woman who's taken into a world that's full of wonder and fear – and goes on an adventure through that world. It felt so suited to being seen in a theatrical space."

The story follows a young artist, Mina, who finds herself lost in the expanse of a forbidding Irish forest and becomes trapped in an uneasy alliance with three strangers, all under surveillance from unseen forces and placed in competition for an unseen audience. Think Brothers Grimm meets *Big Brother*. The trailer reveals hints of this juxtaposition, placing Modernist concrete structures against timeless forest backdrops. "It always starts with the visuals for me," Ishana says. "That's the most exciting part of the process. I could do that endlessly – thinking about what spaces look like, what colours to play with... I think that drawing from the aesthetics of other times is very much something we all do right now. In every frame, every space, that dichotomy of the old and the new is at play."

In case that all sounds too arthouse, there are some swipes at the expense of reality TV and *Love Island* too. "I'm always interested in absurdism," Ishana smiles. "The world is a very absurd place right now. For me, it's all *so* funny – what human culture has become. The movie is very much about this."

Mina doubts Ciara (Georgina Campbell).

Dakota Fanning as Mina, doing watching.

Bet Kevin McCloud would absolutely love this place.

Red Alert

> "The world is a very absurd place right now. For me, it's all so funny"

Ishana Night Shyamalan directing on set.

Ishana had not visited the Emerald Isle before pre-production began, but the Irish landscapes and undertones of folklore proved inspiring. "What AM Shine wrote was so descriptive about life in Ireland, drawing from his own experiences and the places he knows," she explains. "I got to hang out with him a bit. He took me to the pub he wrote his book in, and we shot in there. I found myself very enamoured by the people and the places."

Casting the lead role, Ishana had only one actor in mind, setting her sights on Dakota Fanning, most recently seen in Netflix's *Ripley*. "Mina felt like she represented, as an archetype, the experience of a young person," the director says. "We were talking about a balance of classic and modernity and Dakota has that quality, tenfold. She's a very timeless, classical actress, yet she has a very modern feel about her."

The cast also includes Georgina Campbell, late of *Broadchurch*, relative newcomer Oliver Finnegan, and celebrated Irish stage actor Olwen Fouéré. "It was kind of a puzzle, putting together the pieces. It's a bit of an ensemble piece, so I was looking for different flavours that could come together to create some wondrous, specific feeling. These four actors are all totally incredible. I feel very lucky to have had them come to me."

Rounding out the eclectic group is one other key performer: Fanning's character brings a scene-stealing yellow parrot along for the ride. "We had a hero parrot and she was *so* lovely," Ishana enthuses. "We would turn on the camera onto this parrot and she would give these beautiful performances and know *exactly* what to do. It was crazy – such a captivating bird."

Ishana is braced for the comparisons with her father's canon but is hopeful that *The Watched* can stand apart, and is proud of her film. "In essence, I hope that it plays on what you would expect from the M Night Shyamalan world and then takes you somewhere else," she says.

"There was one day on set where I was in awe because I walked into a room and it was *exactly* what I had envisioned when I read the book for the first time. That was a kind of spiritual moment for me, feeling the magic of moviemaking. You take your imagination and just manifest it, right in front of you."

The Watched is in cinemas from 7 June.

SCI-FACT! **Novelist AM Shine cites the mordant works of Edgar Allan Poe as his greatest literary inspiration.**

EDITOR EXCLUSIVE

Battle Royale

Ahead of the 2027 Avengers movie, Marvel's classic crossover **Secret Wars** celebrates its 40th anniversary

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

SET TO BE THE BASIS of 2027's *Avengers: Secret Wars*, *Marvel Super Heroes: Secret Wars* made comic book history when it was first published in 1984.

Written by Marvel's then editor-in-chief Jim Shooter and illustrated by Mike Zeck and Bob Layton, the 12-issue maxi-series was the first universe-wide superhero crossover, predating DC Comics' *Crisis On Infinite Earths* by almost a year.

However, it was actually conceived as a tie-in with Mattel's new line of action figures and playsets, which didn't find favour with Marvel's leading scripters at the time.

"Jim and I offered *Secret Wars* to a few of our top writers, but no one was interested in writing a 'toy' book," recalls *Secret Wars* editor Tom De Falco, who also recently wrote the retro series *Secret Wars: Battleworld*. "After a long discussion, we decided that Jim was the best option and since Jim and I had worked on many projects together, I had no problems editing him. I was Marvel's Executive Editor at the time – a job I was given after having written comics like *Marvel Team-Up*, *Two-In-One* and *Machine Man* and editing all the *Spider-Man* comics and titles like *GI Joe* and *Ghost Rider*. Since I'd worked with Mattel on the toy line, I was the obvious choice to edit the comic book."

Initially created to tie-in with the 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow, *Secret Wars* was repurposed when the USA boycotted the event after the USSR's invasion of Afghanistan. The groundwork for the series had arguably been laid in 1982 by Mark Gruenwald, John Romita Jr and Bob Layton's three-parter *Contest Of Champions*. This centred on rival Elders of the Universe the Grandmaster and Death, who assemble two opposing teams of heroes to battle it out to obtain all four pieces of the Golden Globe of Life. "When Marvel finally decided to publish it as a miniseries, we were all quite surprised and pleased that it sold so well," says De Falco, who maintains that *Contest Of Champions* didn't actually have much influence on *Secret Wars*. "Marvel routinely guest-starred various characters in each other's books and we had many big events over the years."

While the cast list was dictated by Mattel's product line, Shooter had complete freedom when it came to devising *Secret Wars'* central premise, which involved malevolent cosmic being the Beyonder transporting a diverse range of heroes and villains – such

The 12 issues that made up the original run.

as Spider-Man, the Avengers, the Fantastic Four, Doctor Doom and Kang the Conqueror – to the planet of Battleworld, and pitting them against each other.

"Since we were producing the comic to support the toy line, we focused on the characters that were in it," explains De Falco. He later incorporated characters like Daredevil, Falcon, Baron Zemo, Electro and Iceman, who "were added in the second year of the toyline", into *Secret Wars: Battleworld*, which took place between two panels of the original *Secret Wars* 12.

Beyond the title, derived from its market research, Mattel had little input into *Secret Wars* itself, although it did request that the high-tech armour of characters like Doctor Doom and Iron Man be modified to resemble their action figures, and that various toy fortresses, weapons and vehicles should also appear.

"The comic series was purely the brainchild of Jim Shooter, who came up with a storyline to suit the *Secret Wars* title," says De Falco, who praises Shooter's ability to juggle such a large and disparate cast. "Jim had a great sense of character and he understood how to craft exciting and visual stories. It was always a pleasure to work with him."

Most significantly, *Secret Wars* 8 introduced Spider-Man's black costume, which four years later morphed into the fan-favourite alien symbiote Venom. Officially making their debut in May 1984's *Amazing Spider-Man* 252, one of *Secret Wars*' various spin-off issues, these new togs were actually inspired by an idea from a reader.

"A gentleman by the name of Randy Schueller sold Jim a plot in which Spider-Man adopted a 'stealth' costume," says De Falco. "Jim decided to use the idea of a new costume – but not the design that Randy submitted – in *Secret Wars*. Mike Zeck, who is a terrific artist and visual storyteller, designed Spidey's black costume, although Rick Leonardi also added a few touches to it."

Secret Wars proved popular with readers, outselling all other comics that had been published in the previous 25 years, and inevitably leading to 1985's *Secret Wars II* by Shooter and artist Al Milgrom, in which the Beyonder journeyed to Earth.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time and the readers were demanding a sequel," says De Falco, who had left Marvel by the time of 1988's *Secret Wars III* – which was, curiously, serialised in *Fantastic Four* 318-319.

"It's always gratifying when a story stands the test of time,'" adds De Falco. "I hope my *Battleworld* story sparks the demand for even more *Secret Wars*."

Marvel Comics is releasing facsimile editions of Secret Wars 1-12 throughout 2024.

SCI-FACT! ***Secret Wars*** **has previously appeared on the small screen in 1990's** ***Spider-Man*** **animated series.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

→ Ralph Ineson to voice planet-noshing menace Galactus in **Fantastic Four**, with John Malkovich and Natasha Lyonne also onboard.
→ Andy Serkis directs and stars in **The Lord Of The Rings: The Hunt For Gollum**, set for release in 2026.
→ Vin Diesel returns in **Riddick: Furya** with production beginning this August.
→ Sigourney Weaver said to feature in Jon Favreau's **The Mandalorian & Grogu**.
→ Edgar Wright in talks to direct **Barbarella** with Sydney Sweeney in the title role.
→ **Supergirl: Woman Of Tomorrow** arrives 26 June 2026.
→ Disney looking to revive the **Maze Runner** franchise.
→ Ella Purnell joining horror-comedy **The Scurry**.
→ Al Pacino and Dan Stevens to star in exorcism tale **The Ritual**.
→ Emma Stone reuniting with director Yorgos Lanthimos for **Bugonia**, a remake of 2003's *Save The Green Planet*.
→ Austin Butler rumoured for the **Pirates Of The Caribbean** reboot.
→ JJ Abrams returns with supernatural movie **Acorns**.

CRAIG BARRITT/GETTY FOR LANEIGE

ICON INTERVIEW

Behind The Mask

William Shatner shows his vulnerable side in **You Can Call Me Bill**, a new documentary

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

"...so I twisted it like this, and it came off in my hand."

THERE CAN SURELY BE FEW contemporary lives better documented than William Shatner's. The erstwhile Enterprise captain has conducted thousands of interviews, and penned a shelf-full of memoirs. However, a new film by Alexandre O Philippe (director of films like *Memory: The Origins of Alien*) goes where no documentarian has gone before, offering new angles on this 20th century icon.

Drawing on several days of interview sessions (interwoven with scores of vintage clips), *You Can Call Me Bill* may surprise those whose image of Shatner is fixed as James T Kirk. For one thing, it showcases the somewhat mystical views of a man who has a firm belief in the interconnectedness of things.

CONNECT THE DOTS

"There is the whole theory of our molecular connectivity," the now 93-year-old actor tells Red Alert, "but you see it all around us. Is there such a thing as happenstance, or is that connectivity tied to things happening in our lives? I was thinking of so-and-so, then the phone rang and it was so-and-so – is that part of our connectivity? It's possible to explain it that way: that everything is tied together, and there's no chance. This activity raised here raises activity there – we're connected.

"Dark matter, for example," Shatner continues, warming to his theme. "We don't even know what it is, but we know something's afoot. Underneath the ground we walk on is a latticework of mycelium. It's like electrical cords under everything. Is it only there – and in leaves, and our nerves? They're all similar! The scaffolding is very similar. Why would it be dissimilar out in space, with dark matter?"

Was he always fascinated by such things? Not in quite the same way. Shatner recalls a youthful moment when, as a city boy out in the country, he became entranced by the night sky. "I'm sitting in absolute darkness, in a forest, on a log, and I look up and see the Milky Way.

You won't be doing this when *you're* 93 years old.

And I fell over backwards, and landed on my back! That falling backwards emphasised how enthralled I was with the sky and the mystery of all of that."

Today, after years of reading, studying and "asking questions", Shatner is "consumed" with such mysteries, professing a "great interest in the universe, and its meaning".

The documentary also shows his vulnerable side. In one particularly affecting section he discusses loneliness, confessing, "I've never had a real friend". How did Philippe get him to open up? Shatner was simply "ready", he says. "I wanted to reveal the human being. Very rarely do we speak to somebody and reveal a real truth about ourselves. Mostly it's about the [sports] game, and the job. Rarely do you talk about your loneliness and how it came about, and what the problem is.

"But I've come to the conclusion that everybody's lonely," he adds. "Sometimes they have so much going on that they don't recognise it – only in silent moments. Or when you get older, you think, 'My god, all those people I knew that I thought were friends are dead. I'm alone. *I'm alone.* I'm going to die alone.' It's so frightening for a lot of people that you don't want to look at it. So you ignore it – fill it with wine, women or song."

Would he have been capable of such emotional openness in, say, his thirties? "I would be embarrassed," Shatner admits. "I would think of all the meals I ate alone, and theatre companies I was in where I was alone. I drink an odd beer, but the actors that would get drunk and be in a haze the next day... I didn't do that. I was not with the drinking crowd. But I'd wonder, 'What are they doing?

> **"I've come to the conclusion that everybody's lonely"**

They're drinking and laughing.' At 35, I wasn't ready to drop that mask of, 'I don't care. If that's what friendship is, I don't want to do that. It's a waste of my time.'"

"Masks" is, Shatner notes, the title of a song he's written (as yet unreleased). "It's about how all of us have masks that we use every day. I tried to drop the mask in these interviews. I tried to be as vulnerable and honest as possible. I wanted my kids to see their father – and their grandfather – in reality. I was thinking that if I was going to leave anything that resembled a legacy, it might be this recording."

He approached the process as an adventure – in line with his general philosophy. "I try to think of my life as an adventure," he says. "I tell my kids, when they seek advice, that our life is a book. We're writing that book as we speak. As I'm talking to you, I'm having an experience with you, and writing that chapter in the book. And you should live your life as though you're writing an adventure story. Go have an adventure! Go write, 'I did this, that was new and different and challenging.'

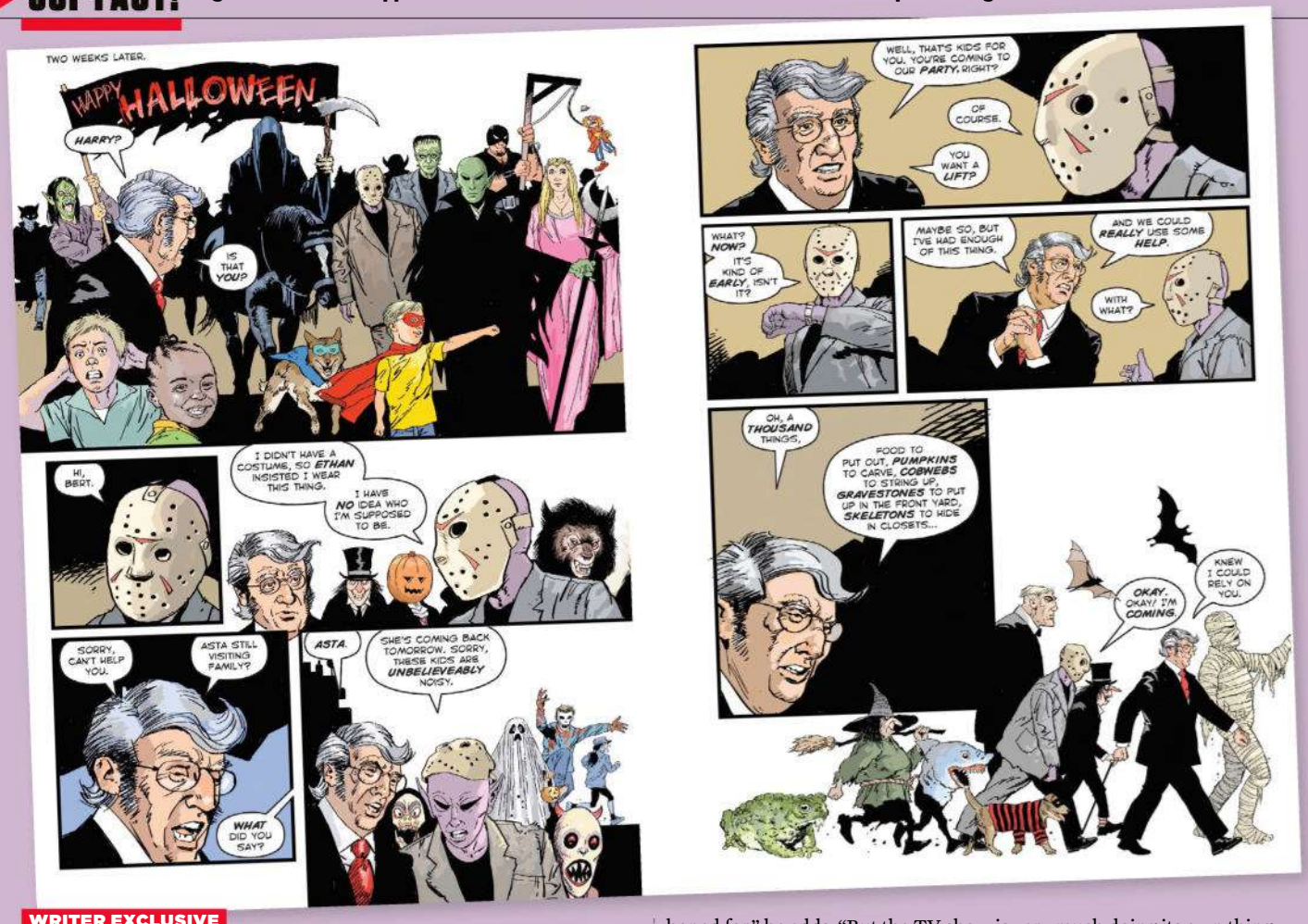
"It's a book that will end," he adds, with characteristic Shatnerian wryness, "when you die." Here's hoping that The Book Of Bill still has many more chapters to come.

You Can Call Me Bill is out now on Blu-ray and download.

SIGNATURE ENTERTAINMENT

SCI-FACT! **Alexandre O Philippe's 2004 doc *Earthlings: Ugly Bags of Mostly Water* centred on members of the Klingon Language Institute.**

SCI-FACT! **Hogan made a cameo appearance in the *Resident Alien* season three finale as tech expert Mr Hogan.**


TWO WEEKS LATER.
HAPPY HALLOWEEN
HARRY?
IS THAT YOU?
HI, BERT.
I DIDN'T HAVE A COSTUME, SO ETHAN INSISTED I WEAR THIS THING.
I HAVE NO IDEA WHO I'M SUPPOSED TO BE.
SORRY, CAN'T HELP YOU.
ASTA STILL VISITING FAMILY?
WHAT DID YOU SAY?
ASTA.
SHE'S COMING BACK TOMORROW. SORRY, THESE KIDS ARE UNBELIEVEABLY NOISY.
WELL, THAT'S KIDS FOR YOU. YOU'RE COMING TO OUR PARTY, RIGHT?
OF COURSE.
YOU WANT A LIFT?
WHAT? NOW? IT'S KIND OF EARLY, ISN'T IT?
MAYBE SO, BUT I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THIS THING.
AND WE COULD REALLY USE SOME HELP.
WITH WHAT?
OH, A THOUSAND THINGS.
FOOD TO PUT OUT, PUMPKINS TO CARVE, COBWEBS TO STRING UP, GRAVESTONES TO PUT UP IN THE FRONT YARD, SKELETONS TO HIDE IN CLOSETS...
OKAY, OKAY! I'M COMING.
KNEW I COULD RELY ON YOU.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Tales Of The Expecting

Harry and Asta expect a new arrival in **Resident Alien: The Book Of Life**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE SEASON THREE RECENTLY CONCLUDED ON the small screen, *Resident Alien* is about to return to comics (where it began). However, according to writer Peter Hogan, fans of the TV series should be wary of diving in at the deep end of the Steve Parkhouse-illustrated comic book.

"The books are very different to the show," he tells Red Alert. "They're basically two very different narratives, which are parallel stories rather than one being ahead of the other. Dark Horse have released the monthly comic in omnibus versions, so new readers can easily follow the whole story from the beginning, which will be a much more enjoyable experience than trying to jump in at Book Eight.

"The new readers who've been vocal about it all seem to be enjoying the books, so that's all we could really have hoped for," he adds. "But the TV show is very much doing its own thing, and so are Steve and I, so there's not much crossover between the two versions at all."

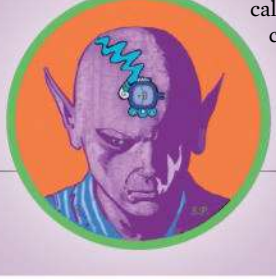
Like season three, seventh comic book volume *The Book Of Love* ended with a cliffhanger as Asta discovered that she might be having a baby, which could have wider implications for not just her and Harry but the whole world.

"That's a reasonable assumption," confirms Hogan. "The new series leads straight on from *The Book Of Love*, so we'll find out if she actually is pregnant, and how they feel about it. We'll also be dealing with family in the broader sense as Asta's aunt Shona enters the story, and Harry and Asta will also be moving house and dealing with some of life's harder moments as well. The crime element of the story kind of drops away now, as we emphasise their personal lives instead."

Hogan is enjoying his continuing partnership with Parkhouse. "This whole thing happened because I'm an enormous Steve Parkhouse fan and have been ever since *The Bojeffries Saga*," he says, referring to Parkhouse and Alan Moore's *Munsters*-esque strip, which first appeared in *Warrior* in 1983.

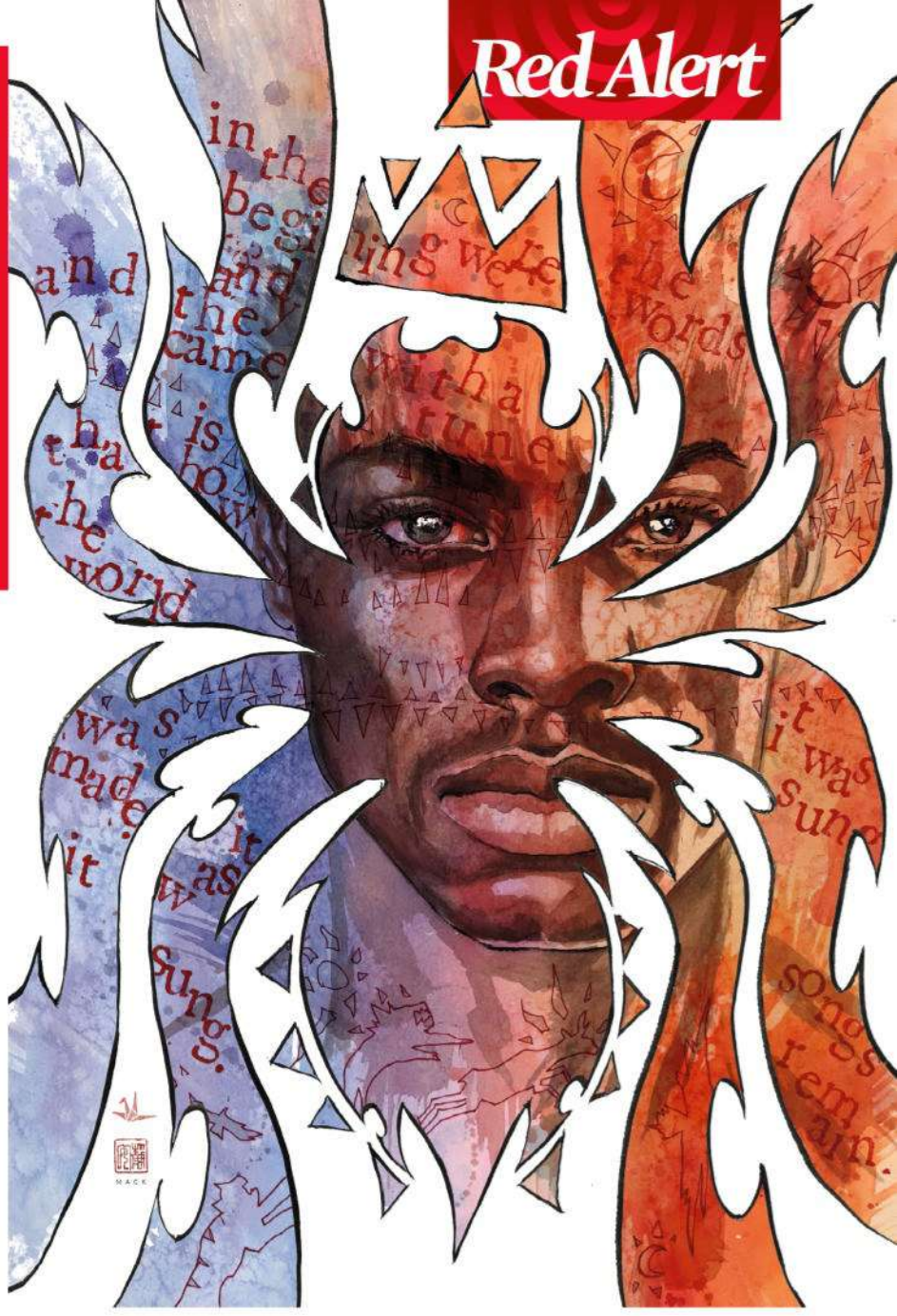
"Then we discovered that we work really well together, and generally we just trust each other to get on with it. We did talk a great deal at the start of *Resident Alien* about what we wanted to do and what we wanted to avoid doing, and the whole idea came about in the first place because Steve had suggested we do something involving aliens."

While the TV show has yet to be renewed for another season, Hogan has a definite end point in mind for the comic. "Book Nine will be called *The Book Of Changes*," he says. "I saw this reader comment a year or so ago, asking for 'more Men in Black and more flying saucers and more aliens!' I thought that was a perfectly reasonable request..."



Resident Alien: The Book Of Life issue one is out 26 June.

The main cover (far right) and alternate versions.



CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

God Sons

Dark Horse is adapting Neil Gaiman's **Anansi Boys** for comics

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

AFTER *AMERICAN GODS* AND *Norse Mythology*, Dark Horse Comics is now adapting Neil Gaiman's 2005 novel *Anansi Boys* into a trio of eight-issue miniseries. While Gaiman liaised with writer Marc Bernardin and artist Shawn Martinbrough during the development process, he has mostly taken a hands-off position.

"I got a few notes from Neil when he read the first couple of scripts, which were more questions than mandates," says Bernardin. "Then they stopped, which I interpreted as him being happy enough with what he was reading to leave us to the work.

"My philosophy with adaptation is a bit like a doctor: first do no harm. If the story is working – and *Anansi Boys* works like gangbusters – then why change anything if you don't have to? Of course, porting one medium to another always requires some manipulation and invention, but we've endeavoured to do it in the spirit of the original work."

"The details are all there in Neil's book and Marc's scripts, but I've had all the freedom to create," adds Martinbrough. "My job as an artist is to visualise and build the words as written, and I also worked very closely with our colourist Christopher Sotomayor to create specific colour palettes for this story, giving the adaptation of the Anansi Boys a very unique and distinct look.

"Before designing the characters, I asked Marc if he had any ideas for their looks, and when he suggested a particular person or vibe I would assemble photo reference folders and use them to create a look. That type of visual exploration was a very fun part of the storytelling process."

The novel centres on Londoner Fat Charlie Nancy, who discovers not only that his late father was actually West African trickster god Anansi the Spider, but that he also has a mysterious twin brother. Bernardin and Martinbrough were intrigued by the way it explores African folklore from a particularly British perspective.

"It's been a fascinating process and an educational one," says Bernardin. "Neil clearly did so much research into Anansi lore and it's incredibly illuminating as an African-American writer as there's an abundance of richness to work with. But we're leaning heavily on the novel for the Britishness – I have no intention of trying to out-English Neil Gaiman!"

"I've been to London several times so I'm familiar with the influence of Caribbean culture there," continues Martinbrough. "I'm a native New Yorker and my father's side of the family hails from Barbados, so I'm quite familiar with American Caribbean culture. For both to be so present in the story of the Anansi Boys was a real treat."

Martinbrough also emphasises *Anansi Boys*' humorous qualities. "Despite the supernatural elements and folklore, I found the original novel to be, at its heart, a slice-of-life comedy," he says. "I was surprised by how funny it was and that inspired me to focus on visualising the comedy in the characters. The polar opposite character traits of Fat Charlie and Spider gave me so much material to work with, and they are so much fun to draw."

Anansi Boys issue one is out on 26 June.

SCI-FACT! **Gaiman is co-writing a *Anansi Boys* TV show with Lenny Henry and *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*'s Arvind Ethan David.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Her Friend's Electric

Sunny creator Katie Robbins unleashes her kawaii-inspired robot into a Japanese noir murder mystery

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

STICK AN ANDROID IN a person's home against their will and you've got the perfect scenario for murder and mayhem. Irish author Colin O'Sullivan explored that premise in his 2018 sci-fi/noir novel *The Dark Manual*. A few years later, screenwriter Katie Robbins (*The Affair*) saw the potential in it for a television series about grief, marital secrets, tech paranoia, female friendship and the Yakuza.

SUNNY DAZE

Robbins's idea is now the Apple TV+ show *Sunny*, a darkly witty near-future remix of O'Sullivan's book. Both centre on Irish expat in Japan Suzie Sakamoto (Rashida Jones). She's just lost her husband Masa (Hidetoshi Nishijima) and young son in a freak plane crash, and is adrift trying to figure out what's next – not expecting that it might be a murder mystery about Masa's secret life involving Sunny (Joanna Sotomura), a perky, bespoke home android he programmed just for her.

"I love finding humour in sort of the worst places," Robbins tells Red Alert, when asked what attracted her to the book. "Japan is a place that I feel a great affinity and love for too. But then there was this story at the core of it about what happens to a person after a loss. How do we rebuild ourselves?

"I was also simultaneously wanting to talk about female friendships, so I changed the robot from the book from male to female and changed the way that Suzie meets the robot, and used it as a way of talking about female friendships in this kind of unlikely relationship," Robbins continues. "They're a bit of an odd couple."

The show's tone is also quirky, with a piquant blend of morbid humour, nonlinear storytelling and sleek, culturally infused tech. "We really wanted to land the show in a place that you wouldn't be able to put your finger on when it's theoretically taking place," Robbins says of the show's vibe. "Like it could be 20 years from now, or it could be right now, but just a slightly alternate reality of now."

SCENE STEALER

As Suzie revisits old haunts and tries to uncover Masa's hidden work life, it's Sunny who eventually becomes her emotional caretaker and reluctant sidekick. Robbins says she went down the rabbit hole doing research, even visiting Japanese robotic companies to come up with the right Sunny for the show.

"I wanted the bot to be approachable and accessible, but not like an android and not overly humanoid," she explains. "I didn't want to go into any Uncanny Valley territory. [I asked] what was the least we could do while still making the robot something that would be able to extract emotion and that you would have as something that was readable. It was this really delicate balance.

"We also knew that our ideal was to have some kind of corporeal scene partner for Rashida and the other actors who play opposite Sunny," Robbins continues. "Because Sunny is so essential to the story, and because

Suzie with Masa (Hidetoshi Nishijima).

> "I wanted the bot to be approachable and accessible, but not like an android"

Suzie Sakamoto (Rashida Jones).

Just what was Masa up to by building Sunny?

Suzie tries to come to terms with everything.

the concept of the story is that we have the potential to interact with robots in a way that is very similar to the way that we interact with people, you wanted something there. You wanted to feel that physical interaction between the two characters in a way that is underlining that point, so that felt really essential. We didn't want the actors acting opposite a tennis ball."

In the end, Wētā Workshop brought Sunny to life via animatronics and puppetry with an ability to convey nuance. "Our [Sunny] actress, Joanna Sotomura, was sitting off-camera with a camera attached to this helmet so she could watch the person she was in the scene with," Robbins details. "There was a feed going [on set] so she could see their face.

"Then there was a camera on her face projecting into the rear-projected screen of Sunny's face. So when Sunny smiles, that's because Joanna's smiling. When Sunny's eyes tick one way or another, that's because that's what Joanna's face is doing. Then her voice would be projected out of the robot, so it's all happening in real time."

The result is that you believe prickly Suzie and mysterious yet cute Sunny are building a genuine connection as Suzie's quest for answers gets more fraught. "Episode nine is really where we get into some of the stuff about the making of Sunny," Robbins promises audiences. "You start to understand more about why Sunny was created by Masa and the way that Sunny was created."

Robbins also promises a resolution with an open ending, should audiences take a liking to these ladies. "I don't have any information about additional seasons at this point, but there are additional stories that we could imagine telling."

Sunny is on Apple TV+ from 10 July.

SCI-FACT! **Production designer Shinsuke Kojima drew on shoji screens as inspiration for the show's tech.**

NEWS WARP
HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Zoinks! Netflix developing live-action **Scooby-Doo** with Arrowverse supremo Greg Berlanti.
- Phoebe Waller-Bridge's **Tomb Raider** series gets a greenlight at Prime Video.
- Michelle Yeoh to star in **Blade Runner 2099**.
- Nicolas Cage officially onboard for live-action **Spider-Man Noir** series.
- Bryan Fuller exiting *Friday The 13th* prequel series **Crystal Lake**.
- **3 Body Problem** renewed for a second season on Netflix.
- **The Boys** officially renewed for a fifth season on Prime Video.
- Development underway on a second season of animated series **Wytches**.
- Frank Grillo is Rick Flag Sr in season two of **Peacemaker**.
- Season three of **X-Men '97** in early development at Marvel Animation.
- Apple TV+ cancelling **Constellation** after just one season.
- **Agatha All Along** arrives on Disney+ 18 September with **Daredevil: Born Again** following in March '25.
- Prime Video no longer making Sony/Marvel's **Silk: Spider Society**.

MIKE MARSLAND/WIREIMAGE, GETTY

EDITOR EXCLUSIVE

New Mutants

After the Krakoan Age flamed out, the **X-Men** are rising from the ashes with a whole new line of books

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WITH *FALL OF X* HAVING brought the Krakoan period to a devastating close, the X-Men are now entering an all-new epoch. Written and drawn by an entirely new line-up of writers and artists, *From The Ashes* heralds the launch of a new range of comic books, which see the Children of the Atom leaving their island home and settling among various human populaces.

"Our new run is certainly going to be different from the Krakoan era in that mutantkind will once again be fractured and scattered across the globe rather than operating as a singular and united world power," says Marvel Executive Editor Tom Brevoort, who has now taken charge of the X-office.

"The fact that mutants have spent the last couple of years telling regular humans that they don't need to obey human laws and that they're the inheritors of the Earth is going to come back to bite them a little bit, given that their fortunes have changed. Dealing with prejudice and being an outsider is the core theme of *X-Men*, so we'll definitely be getting into that. But a new world has new rules."

Written by Jed MacKay and illustrated by Ryan Stegman, *From The Ashes* begins next month with *X-Men* itself, before the Merry Mutants' two other flagship titles, Gail Simone and David Marquez's *Uncanny X-Men* and Eve L Ewing and Carmen Carnero's *Exceptional X-Men* arrive in August and September.

"I started out by mapping out a sense of the world, where I thought certain characters would fall in the aftermath of Krakoa and who would naturally gravitate towards leadership roles," says Brevoort. "Once I had a sketch, I began looking at creators who might be good at fleshing out those ideas and bringing them to life and embodying them.

"The idea was for each book to do its own thing and have its own approach, so I wasn't looking for three sets of creators to do the same thing – just the opposite. With *Uncanny X-Men*, there is a natural pull towards that title, as it's the one with the history that goes all the way back to the beginning."

While Cyclops, Beast, Magneto, Psylocke, Kid Omega, Juggernaut, Magik and Temper make up the line-up of X-Men, Rogue, Gambit, Nightcrawler, Jubilee and Wolverine join the ranks of Uncanny X-Men, while Kate Pryde, Emma Frost and young mutants Bronze, Axo and Melee are Exceptional X-Men. "I placed a couple of the characters initially and from there the individual writers and artists determined who they were interested in using," explains Brevoort.

The cover for *NYX* issue one, by Sara Pichelli.

All three X-Men teams, by Ryan Stegman.

"So, for example, Rogue being at the forefront of Uncanny X-Men was a beat I started with, and that implied Gambit as well. But from that point on, it was up to Gail and David to fill out their cast."

With the X-Men basing themselves in Alaska, Uncanny X-Men heading for New Orleans and Exceptional X-Men landing in Chicago, the numerous teams are also choosing some different locales.

"The biggest immediate concern that fans expressed when they heard that the Krakoa era was coming to an end was that the X-Men would just be reverting to their 1991 status quo – all living in the mansion in Westchester and doing the same things again," says Brevoort. "But that was never going to be the approach. So the question becomes: without a place to go home, where do the individual players go? Cyclops has family in Alaska, Gambit grew up in New Orleans and Kate was raised just outside of Chicago, simple as that. Additionally, it indicated that even the X-Men would be scattered across the face of the world and not all congregating in a unified front in one common location."

> **"I wasn't looking for three sets of creators to do the same thing – just the opposite"**

Along with the three core titles, a host of additional series are also set for release, beginning in July with Geoffrey Thorne and Marcus To's *X-Force*, Stephanie Phillips and Alessandro Miracolo's *Phoenix* and Collin Kelly, Jackson Lanzing and Francesco Mortarino's *NYX*. "I mostly just made up stuff that I liked," says Brevoort. "The idea was to have a wide range of material, so *Phoenix* is more of a cosmic book while *NYX* is a more grounded, urban series, and so forth."

After the fantastical, hard sci-fi of the Krakoan Age, will there now be a more down to Earth quality to the X-Men's adventures? "The X-Men have always been a bit more of a science fiction concept than the average superhero series, so I'm sure we'll see some of that," says Brevoort. "But my overall aim is that every book in the line has its own flavour, its own tone and its own genre style to it. We're looking to have many different flavours of *X-Men* titles, not just one."

X-Men is out on 10 July, Phoenix on 17 July, NYX on 24 July and X-Force on 31 July. Uncanny X-Men is out on 7 August and Exceptional X-Men on 4 September.

SCI-FACT! **The previous, fifth volume of *Uncanny X-Men* (which was first published in 1963), concluded with issue 600 in 2016.**

SCI-FACT! **Strontium Dog and Judge Dredd first met in John Wagner and Colin MacNeil's "Top Dog" in 1991's final *Judge Dredd Annual*.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Scrot If...?

Great news for readers as top characters merge in the 2024 **2000 AD Sci-Fi Special**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

Johnny Alpha becomes a judge in, er, *Judge Alpha*.

WHILE THEY HAVE PREVIOUSLY APPEARED IN EACH other's strips, *2000 AD*'s characters are truly coming together in this year's *Sci-Fi Special*, which features a selection of alternate universe amalgamations of some of the Galaxy's Greatest Comic's best-known protagonists, leading off with "Cursed Earth actioner" *Judge Alpha*.

"As the name suggests, this *Elseworlds*-style tale sees sometime mutant bounty hunter Johnny Alpha born into the world of Judge Dredd instead," says writer Karl Stock, who is paired with artist Ben Willsher. "His alpha-ray eyes make him perfect for the Justice Department's SD [Special Dispensation] squad of permitted mutants, their special abilities weaponised in the battle against crime. This puts him at odds with the overwhelming majority of mutants who are still illegal in Mega-City One – and with some familiar mutant-haters from *Strontium Dog*'s mythology."

Meanwhile, James Peaty and Nicolò Assirelli's *Rogue/Dog* fuses *Strontium Dog* with *Rogue Trooper*'s Genetic Infantryman. "My main inspiration actually wasn't a *2000 AD* story but rather Mark Waid and Dave Gibbons's Super-Soldier issue for Amalgam Comics, which was a perfect splicing of Superman and Captain America," reveals Peaty, referring to 1996's Marvel/DC crossover comics.

"That's what I'm aiming for here as we follow a lone blue-skinned former Strontium Dog wandering the surface of an inhospitable planet, trying to get to the bottom of his betrayal – while at the same time there's a bounty on his head, and some familiar faces from the Doghouse are on his tail."

With *Robo-Sharks*, Dan Abnett and Anthony Williams combine *Sinister Dexter* with *Robo-Hunter*. "You might decide there's some satirical commentary about the current AI debate and turmoil as 'Roboshark' Dexter and his robot sidekick Finny investigate illegal new tech that allows robots to pass for human and evade detection, but that's not for me to say!" laughs Abnett.

He believes that both series' focus on "low life crime stories" make them an ideal pairing, while *Sinister Dexter*'s recent transformation into "full-on epic about post-singularity and body-modified humanity" *Azimuth* in the prog itself "makes *Robo-Sharks* more timely than ever."

Working with artist Paul McCaffrey, Ian Edginton has united two of the core stories from his so-called Edginton-verse. "Stickleback wouldn't feel out of place on a pirate ship and they'd certainly fit right in with the crew of the Red Wench from *The Red Seas*," he says. "They're not the only crossover characters, though, as a number of other familiar faces show up too – ones from my own stories and a smattering of classic *2000 AD* faces as well."

Finally, Al Ewing (teamed with artist Boo Cook), has returned to *Zombo*, which is gruesomely enmeshed with *Harlem Heroes*. "At first, that seemed out of left field but once I'd refamiliarised myself with the Heroes and Aeroball, it all fell into place," he says. "In this merged continuity, the hoverbus crash that took out the Heroes in prog 1 still killed half the team... except that they were then reanimated to create half-human, half-zombie hybrids. We treat the entire concept of '70s future sport with the reverence and care that *Zombo* readers expect!"

2000 AD Sci-Fi Special 2024 is out on 3 July.

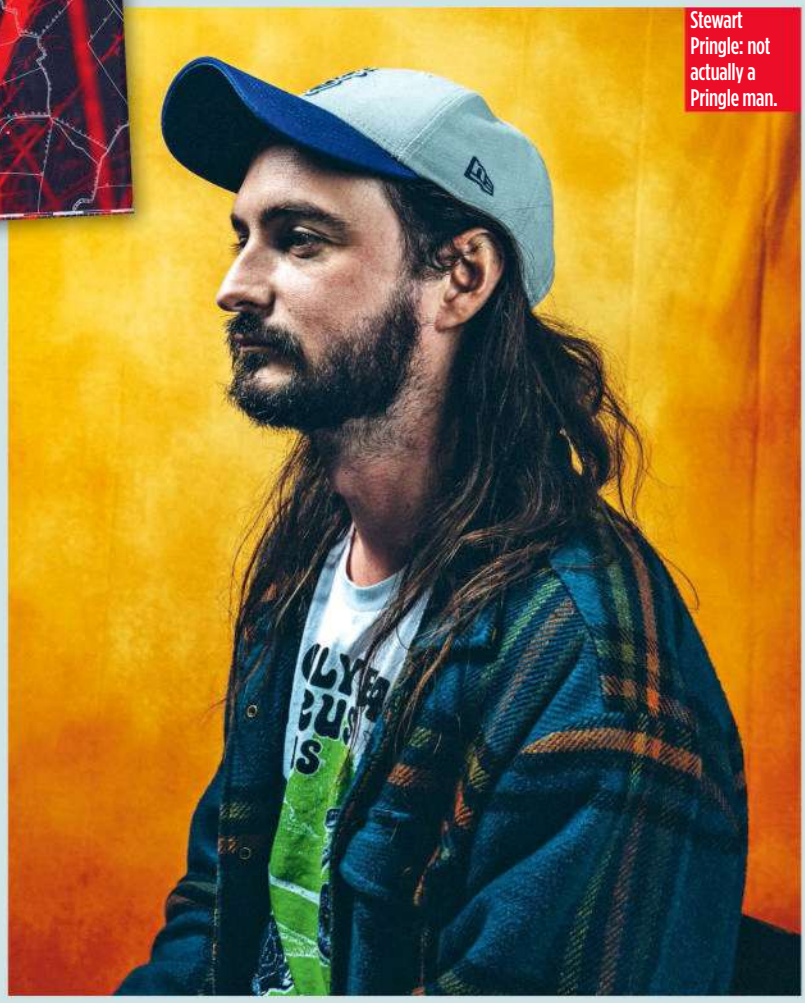
SCI-FACT! **Pringle is currently working on another folk horror tale, this time as part of Big Finish's *Torchwood* range.**

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Foul Play

Playwright Stewart Pringle on bringing folk horror to the stage with **The Bounds**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**



Stewart Pringle: not actually a Pringle man.

FOLK HORROR has been undergoing something of a renaissance in recent years, but mostly on the big and small screens. Now it's theatre's turn to get in on the act with the arrival of a new play that brings those themes of isolation and superstition to the stage.

"I'd say that everything is more frightening when it's right in front of you," says writer Stewart Pringle of his new play *The Bounds*, which begins a four-week run at London's Royal Court Theatre on 13 June. "The great thing about theatre, particularly when you're doing stuff that's in the genre world, is that you're in a shared space – you're breathing the same air as other people and going through it together."

Pringle's play is set in Northumbria in 1553 against the backdrop of the English Reformation. But while it includes many tropes of the folk horror genre ("Our props list contains quite a lot of sheep skulls!" laughs Stewart), it's also as much about football – or at least what passed as football in the 16th century. "I liked the idea of doing something about tribalism and sport," says Pringle, who first came across Shrovetide football, as it's called, after visiting a Tudor house in Margate. "It felt like taking this strange, wild, slightly unknown game as its centrepoint could be a good place to start."

Pringle says that many big-screen horrors fed into the writing of *The Bounds*. There's a bit of *Blood On Satan's Claw* and *Midsommar* in its DNA, as well as Ben Wheatley's *A Field In England* and also *Berberian Sound Studio*. "That idea of the monstrous bleeding its way into the everyday felt really important," he says of Peter Strickland's 2012 psychological horror. "There's also a bit of [1971 story] 'The Daemons' from *Doctor Who* in there, and *Psycho*, all that stuff has been thrown into the melting pot."

Pringle and director Jack McNamara bonded over, he reveals, a love of '60s and '70s folk horror, specifically the "holy trinity" of *Blood on Satan's Claw*, *The Wicker Man* and *Witchfinder General*. "The thing about those films is how they're tied to the landscape, and that relationship of violence and the uncanny with the ground and the earth," the writer says. "Our set, which is designed by Verity Quinn, is a kind of huge mound of earth, which is extruding its way through the floor."

> **"There's also a bit of 'The Daemons' in there"**

Outside of his theatre work, Pringle is also a regular writer on Big Finish's *Doctor Who* audio range, and he admits there's a strong *Who* vibe to his latest play.

"Ryan Nolan, who's playing Percy, came up to me on the first day of rehearsals, and was like 'You're a *Doctor Who* fan, aren't you?' I replied that I was and he was like, 'Bloody hell, this is like a massive feature-length, really freaky episode of *Doctor Who*, but for grown-ups!' I was just like, 'Well, I'll take that as a compliment then!'"

The Bounds is at the Royal Court Theatre, London from 13 June to 13 July.

SCI-FACT! **Panini is releasing *Return Of The Daleks* next month, a collection of *Doctor Who Weekly*'s rarely reprinted back-up strips.**

(Right) One of the cover variants, by Artgerm.

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Death Mall

The Doctor and Ruby shop till they drop in Titan Comics's new **Fifteenth Doctor** series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE NCUTI GATWA and Millie Gibson's inaugural season in the TARDIS will soon draw to a close, the Fifteenth Doctor and Ruby Sunday's adventures are continuing in a new miniseries from writer Dan Watters and artist Kelsey Ramsay – who were venturing into the unknown somewhat, considering that only the Christmas episode had been broadcast at the time they embarked upon the four-parter.

"I have good guidance from the BBC and access to scripts and things," Watters tells Red Alert. "Some of my draft dialogue might have been a little too Eleventh Doctor, but once you pick up on the cadence and rhythm of a character, it becomes steadily easier to write them as they start to live in your head.

"Every Doctor is distinct – that's kind of the point if you ask me – and Fifteen is a fizzling ball of energy, perhaps more in touch with the modern world than more recent iterations."

He and Ramsay have had to tread carefully to avoid any spoilers. "There's a ton of secrecy," adds Watters. "It makes me feel like I'm in a John le Carré novel!"

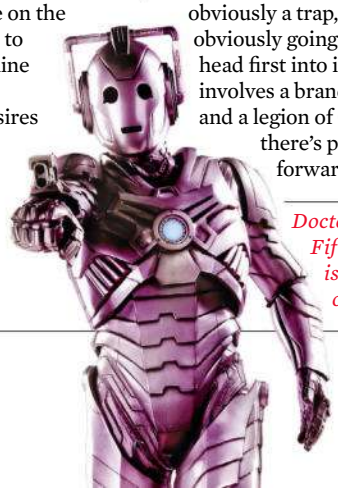
Ramsay has striven to capture the Doctor and Ruby's distinctive looks. "Likeness was a challenge for me at first and choosing what features I thought were most identifying for both of them took me a little time," she says. "Thinking about shape – strong facial structures and eyes were what I focused on, and considering I don't have a realistic style I think we got to something good!"

Picking up directly from last month's Free Comic Book Day *Doctor Who* issue, the series sees the Doctor and Ruby sent on a potentially deadly retail excursion. "I was interested in setting a story on Earth after it was abandoned, since this had been alluded to a bunch in future-set episodes of the show," explains Watters. "I was tickled by the idea that a shopping mall would be the last functioning structure on the planet. It made sense to me – a mall is a machine designed to cater to human needs and desires in ways both benign and sinister.

"After all, once we've walked through their doors, their purpose is to keep us there."

"I had a lot of fun drawing all kinds of shoppers milling around and playing around with the futuristic side to it to allow for some creative pages and sequences," continues Ramsay. "Humans would have to be making some interesting fashion choices in the future, right?"

As indicated by the Free Comic Book Day issue, in which they faced a cybernetically assisted Dick Turpin, the Doctor and Ruby will encounter one of the Time Lord's old enemies. "We've built a whole new mystery for the Doctor to chase," teases Watters. "It's obviously a trap, so he's obviously going to charge head first into it. This involves a brand new villain and a legion of Cybermen, so there's plenty to look forward to."



Doctor Who: The Fifteenth Doctor issue one is out on 26 June.

SFX SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO

◆ Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson made a number of appearances in the US in May as part of the promotional launch for *Doctor Who* on Disney+. The pair posed in front of billboards at New York's Times Square and alongside a specially-themed subway train. Broadcast interviews took place with *Good Morning America*, *ABC News* and *Late Night With Seth Meyers*.

The TARDIS was also stationed at Downtown Disney in California for photo opportunities. *SFX* attended the US premiere for the season, and you can read more on page 64.

◆ **In the UK, various BBC idents and radio trailers/takeovers featuring Ncuti Gatwa as the Doctor appeared in the run-up to season launch. In one specially filmed sequence, the Doctor appeared on a future version of *Match Of The Day*. Gatwa, along with Millie Gibson, gave a number of interviews for various UK shows and publications.**

◆ There's a brand new official *Doctor Who* podcast available weekly. The show is now presented by Nadia Jae and Shabaz Ali, who are joined by a guest each week. The show also features appearances from Russell T Davies, who has possibly now cloned himself.

◆ **Three new Target novels are now available for pre-order on various websites. *Space Babies* by Alison Rumfitt, *73 Yards* by Scott Handcock and *Rogue* by Kate Herron and Briony Redman are due for release in August.**

◆ Titan is releasing new merchandise for each episode of season one, exclusively available from Forbidden Planet. These include T-shirts, badges, mugs, prints, keyrings and postcards.

Also available exclusively from Forbidden Planet is a gold-coloured version of the Fourteenth Doctor's sonic screwdriver. The original version has also been re-released.

◆ **The two-part season finale will be shown in cinemas across the UK on 21 June as a partnership between BBC Studios and CinemaLive. Showrunner Russell T Davies said: "This is a great big rip-roaring finale with the Doctor, Ruby and friends old and new fighting the greatest enemy of their lives. I can't wait for everyone to see it!" For more information visit doctorwhoincinemas.co.uk.**

◆ Steven Moffat confirmed to *Total TV Guide* that he has written the 2025 Christmas special, entitled "Joy To The World". It stars Nicola Coughlan.

◆ **Ncuti Gatwa graced the cover of *Time* magazine for their early May edition, as one of the "next generation of leaders".**

◆ Gatwa has also been immortalised in wax as a figure of the Fifteenth Doctor for Madame Tussauds in London. He said: "I'm very excited to be joining the iconic line-up at Madame Tussauds London. The process was amazing to witness, I can't wait to see the final result." The finished figure will appear within a specially created Whoniverse-themed set due to open in July, as part of a brand new film and TV-themed zone.

◆ ***Doctor Who: Death In The Stars*, a new novel and audiobook written and narrated by Bonnie Langford, is out on 22 August. The story features Mel and Glitz solving a murder mystery in space.**

◆ Demon Records is releasing "The Highlanders" as a coloured 2LP vinyl on 15 June exclusively at HMV, as part of their Vinyl Week.

◆ **A number of new audio drama releases have been announced by Big Finish. The First, Second and Third Doctors, voiced by Stephen Noonan, Michael Troughton and Tim Treloar, star in two new adaptations of never-produced-for-TV *Doctor Who* stories. *Deathworld* and *Operation Werewolf* are out in July.**

Davros, the Cyber-Leader and the Androgums return in *The Trials Of A Time Lord*, due for release in August, while the Dominators and Quarks return in September's *The Fourth Doctor Adventures: Dominant Species*. Box sets *The Death And Life Of River Song: Last Words* and *The War Doctor Rises: Morbius The Mighty* will also be released in August.

NCUTI GATWA PHOTOGRAPHED BY RUTH OSSAI FOR *TIME*

SCI-FACT! **"Deathworld" was the original treatment for what would become (as a completely different story) "The Three Doctors".**

SCI-FACT! **In 1995 Corman launched comic imprint Roger Corman's Cosmic Comics; *Death Race 2000* and *Little Shop Of Horrors* titles followed.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

ROGER CORMAN 1926-2024

Remembering the King of the Bs

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I'VE HEARD MYSELF DESCRIBED as Hollywood's longest-established rebel," said Roger Corman, reflecting on a prolific career in cult filmmaking, one that saw him become a champion and mentor to the likes of James Cameron, Joe Dante and Francis Ford Coppola.

Born in Detroit, Michigan, Corman had a lifelong affinity for fantastic cinema. "I became a critic for the university newspaper," he told *SFX* in 2008. "Now I had to really analyse the films that I liked... I started thinking, 'This is what I want to do.'"

Abandoning a career in engineering, Corman sold his first screenplay in 1954. Disappointed by the resulting movie, *Highway Dragnet*, he raised $12,000 to produce his own shot at a hit, *Monster From The Ocean Floor* (1954). As a producer and director for exploitation kings AIP, Corman went on to create a colourful run of B-pictures from *It Conquered The World* (1956) to *Teenage Caveman* (1958) and *The Wasp Woman* (1959). Made at breakneck speed on shoestring budgets, these were hyperbolic, high-concept entertainments, unashamedly targeting America's teens.

Corman's horror-comedy classic *The Little Shop Of Horrors* arrived in 1960, the same year he launched his memorable series of Edgar Allan Poe adaptations with *House Of Usher*. Lurid and macabre, these gothic confections were a perfect fit for velvety star Vincent Price. Corman set up his own company, New World Pictures, in 1970, going on to produce such popular genre titles as *Death Race 2000* (1975) and *Battle Beyond The Stars* (1980). He returned to directing after a two-decade hiatus wth 1990's *Frankenstein Unbound*.

Corman kept working into his nineties, producing such gleefully self-aware schlock as the *Sharktopus* franchise for Syfy. In 2009 he received a lifetime achievement Oscar for his tireless support of films and filmmakers. Not bad for the self-professed "Orson Welles of the Z movie".

Roger Corman pictured in his office, 1978.

ELISA LEONELLI/SHUTTERSTOCK

GUDRUN URE 1926-2024

Scottish actress best known for playing the title role in ITV children's show *Supergran*.

DON PERLIN 1929-2024

American comic book writer and artist, co-creator of *Moon Knight* and *Bloodshot*.

NEW AUTHOR

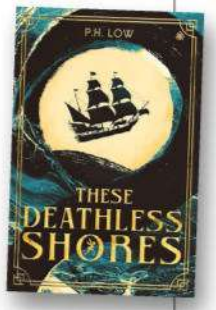
PH LOW

MEET THE WRITER BEHIND *PETER PAN*-INSPIRED FANTASY *THESE DEATHLESS SHORES*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ Jordan is an ex-Lost Boy, exiled to the real world but still in withdrawal from the addictive Dust of her childhood. With nothing left to lose, she returns to the Island intent on facing Peter one last time, on her own terms. If that makes her the villain... so be it.

How does magic work in this world?
→ Dust allows people to fly but can also heal wounds, glamour illusions – pretty much anything. There's also a sentient island.

What relationship does the book have to *Peter Pan*?
→ *These Deathless Shores* treats the original as its own immortal enigma: there's always Peter, some Lost Boys, pirates, and a girl doing chores – even as individuals cycle out from battle and Peter killing children deemed "too old". I was particularly struck by the original's juxtaposition of Peter's alleged purity with, y'know, the murder.



How long did it take?
→ It started as a NaNoWriMo project in 2017! After that, I rewrote it twice from scratch and significantly re-plotted it (eg moving the halfway point to the one-third point) with every revision.

Discover anything interesting during your research?
→ One thing that haunts me is that, after JM Barrie's older brother David died at 14, James comforted his depressed mother by pretending to be him – though only David stayed perfect forever, while James was "condemned to grow up".

These Deathless Shores is out on 9 July, published by Angry Robot.

SFX EXCLUSIVE
SUBSCRIPTION OFFER!

SUBSCRIBE TODAY
AND SAVE UP TO 50%!*

CHOOSE YOUR SUBSCRIPTION

Print and digital edition

£17.87 EVERY 6 MONTHS

Digital edition

£14.30 EVERY 6 MONTHS

PRINT + DIGITAL ACCESS

NEW! Digital access to 150+ issues when you subscribe to print!**

SUBSCRIBE NOW!

ONLINE magazinesdirect.com/SFX/**D37Y**

PHONE 0330 333 1113 and quote code **D37Y**

Offer closes 7th August 2024. Price is guaranteed for the first 6 months, please allow up to 6 weeks for the delivery of your first subscription issue (up to 8 weeks overseas) the subscription rate includes postage and packaging.*Savings are based on the cover price. Payment is non-refundable after the 14-day cancellation period. **Access to the digital library will end with your subscription. For full terms and conditions, visit www.magazinesdirect.com/terms. For enquiries and overseas rates please call: +44 (0) 330 333 1113. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8:30am-7pm, Saturday 10am-3pm UK Time (excluding Bank Holidays) or email: help@magazinesdirect.com. Calls to 0330 numbers will be charged at no more than a national landline call, and may be included in your phone provider's call bundle.

LOOK WHO'S

TYPEFACE BY DESIGNSENSATION/GE

BACK IN TOWN

THE BOYS SHOWRUNNER ERIC KRIPKE TEASES THE UPCOMING BLOODY, EMOTIONAL, SWEARY FOURTH SEASON. YOUR EYEBALLS AREN'T READY...

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

ERIC KRIPKE HAS HAD TO KEEP his mouth shut for a really *fucking* long time. In fact, the showrunner behind the world's bloodiest, swearyest, and downright weirdest "supe" show, *The Boys*, has yet to speak publicly about the upcoming season – until now, that is. "This marks my official first interview for season four," he tells *SFX* one dreary Monday. "The answers will be fresh!"

With *The Boys* last airing almost two years ago, Kripke's been actively working on a number of other BCU (that's the Boys Cinematic Universe) projects, primarily the spin-off series *Gen V*, which launched last September and has been renewed for a second season. *Gen V* centred on a group of high-school-age superpowered humans training to join the nefarious weapons dealer/multi-platform superhero company Vought International.

Over its first season run, the show became increasingly important to the franchise's overarching story. Homelander – the tyrannical leader of Vought's supe team the Seven – played a key role in the final episode, while Billy Butcher, former head of the Boys (more on that later), appeared in the show's post-credits scene. But perhaps more importantly for the ongoing BCU, the show introduced a virus that can kill anyone with superpowers.

Victoria (Claudia Doumit) and Butcher (Karl Urban).

BUTCHER'S BATTLE

For Butcher, it sounds like the ultimate weapon in his vindictive war against Homelander, and Kripke confirms it will play an important part in season four. "But when it comes up," he says, "we're very careful to say, 'Here's where the virus came from, and here's the story of it.'" In other words, you don't need to watch *Gen V* to understand *The Boys*, partly because the virus is only one thread of season four's story.

Questioned about the main narrative thrust of the upcoming episodes, Kripke points to Claudia Doumit's malevolent, head-popping Victoria Neuman, who has been elected Vice President of the United States. "We open on election day and we have a hidden homicidal supe in the Vice Presidency," Kripke says. "They haven't been confirmed or inaugurated yet, but they have been elected. Our heroes are desperately running out of time to try to avert an entire takeover of the United States government."

To make matters worse, Neuman is under the thumb of Homelander. "He's manipulating that situation," Kripke says. "Their relationship is a lot more fraught and conflicted than you would expect. She finds herself in this Faustian bargain that she's struggling with."

Anthony Starr's Superman-spoofing Homelander has been growing crazier and more maniacal every passing year. Last season, we witnessed him having a Sméagol/Gollum-like conversation with himself in the mirror. "There's always crazier," Kripke teases. "I mean, the big meta-story of the entire series is the slow unravelling of Homelander and whether Butcher can stop him before he goes completely fucking psychotic.

"So every season we know what the next step is and how far we can take Homelander. And it gets a little crazier. He's really wrestling with being a dad, which is both hilarious and horrifying because he's such an infant. He's so selfish and deeply, deeply narcissistic that

Black Noir II with the Deep (Chace Crawford).

caring for another human being who actually relies on him is hilarious to watch because he's so, so bad at it."

Homelander's also dealing with a large section of the public not particularly liking him. As we witnessed last season, Starlight – America's former sweetheart, who's no longer a member of the Seven – exposed just how dangerous Homelander is, and her followers, the Starlighters, want his powers taken away. "The fact there are sections of the public who don't like him really drives him insane," Kripke says. "He's a dense psychological snake's nest of neediness and vulnerability and self-hatred, and he's going to deal with that in some pretty gnarly ways. →

Laz Alonso as Mother's Milk, aka Marvin T. Milk.

MEET THE CAMPBELLS

Jack Quaid talks Hughie's return – and *The Boys*' best season yet

With Butcher no longer the head of the Boys, how has the dynamic of that group changed?
It's very interesting because Annie – Starlight – is now a part of the group. She's not the leader. I love every time the group dynamic changes because it's like being part of the band. We have our team and we have our dynamic, and every time it gets shaken up, it's wonderful. Now Hughie is loyal to Butcher, he's Butcher's Canary. He's been put in a particularly tough position because he's one of the only people who wants him around still, especially after all the stuff they got up to last season. Butcher has a lot of making up to do and it's really cool how that plays out.

How does Hughie develop as a person this season?
His mom comes back. She left when he was really, really young. She comes back into the picture and things get a bit complicated. The great news about that for me, Jack, was I got to work with Rosemarie DeWitt, and I got to work with the great Simon Pegg again. There was tension in the scenes – familial tension – but off camera, I had so much fun working with those two. They're both legends. I learned so much just from watching them. I'm very excited for audiences to see the Campbell chaos.

Last season, Hughie was part of the Herogasm. Does this season top that?
I'm nodding my head very solemnly. I don't know how Eric does it. Every season, the writers are able to top themselves. It seems like a Herculean task, because every season, you just don't think they can possibly push it further. And then they do. I'm definitely involved with some stuff this season that's some of the craziest stuff I've ever done.

I think the secret sauce, though, to *The Boys* is that they're able to make it go further into the grotesque and the bombastic, but secretly, they're also deepening all the characters. The writers know these characters more and more each season, and I was thanking them profusely, because I just thought that everybody's material this season was so good and so true to each character.

I think it's our best season yet because of that. Obviously, we have all of the blood and the gore, too.

GIRLS WHO LIKE BOYS...

Claudia Doumit, Erin Moriarty and Karen Fukuhara talk the girls of *The Boys*

What sort of threat does Vic pose being the soon-to-be VP this season?
Claudia Doumit: It's the unchecked power of it. I mean, I don't think any of us want someone like that getting to any position of power, really. But the thing about this season in particular, the threat feels more like Homelander – like she's treading water this season. She's far more out of control – there isn't a steadiness to her nature. She's coming apart at the seams and it's all very much under the surface, but it was palpable for me, because she's in unfamiliar territory. And that's not great for her because she's a planner. She loves strategy. She loves calculating. She likes to read a situation.

Starlight's no longer in the Seven – she's given up being Starlight. How does that affect her?
Erin Moriarty: She has very, very strict boundaries around even implementing the name Starlight. It's a strong and firm insistence on no one going by that name – she's not even utilising it for her foundation and her charity. She doesn't want to be associated with the entity that went through the amount of trauma that she went through.

It's reflective of her lack of ability to integrate. Because it's very hard to keep going as she's been going and not take a second to really reflect on the sexual abuse reality of the world. There are a lot of epiphanies that she's been forced to reckon with. Her inability to really digest that is reflected in her insistence on not being Starlight and not even using that word. It's about the consequences of her existing in this world as an earnest character.

For Kimiko, with Butcher ousted as leader of the Boys, how does that change the group dynamic?
Karen Fukuhara: Butcher's never really treated the Boys well. We empathise with Butcher's character because we see his backstory with Becca, and we see the reasoning behind everything. But slowly, he's becoming a bit more like Homelander.

I think there's a comparison made between the two and he hasn't really had any of the other Boys' interests in mind, especially Kimiko, and it comes from his hatred towards anyone with powers. We do see a switch happening this season and it's a fresh take on how the Boys should be running.

There's an episode this season where it could be the scariest we've ever seen. I called Anthony after looking at the dailies, and I'm like, 'Wow, man, that is some next-level scary shit.' And not just by being violent, but just how un-fucking-hinged he is. It's a delight."

Of course, Homelander wouldn't be as crazy if it wasn't for Butcher and the Boys chasing him. Except, Butcher's no longer the leader of the Boys. After Karl Urban's gruff supe-chaser double-crossed his team, they'd simply had enough and removed him from the top. What makes Butcher a truly tragic character this season, though, is that he's terminally ill.

"Butcher's trying to set things right while he still has time," says Kripke. "But the Boys are completely fed up with his bullshit and he's been removed as their head. Everyone's fed up with Butcher just when he needs them the most."

Butcher's thoughts during these final months, Kripke says, are on the legacy he wants to leave behind. "And what he's really leaving behind is just a huge flaming shitshow of failure. He lost Ryan, Homelander's stronger than ever. Butcher feels like he has one last shot at it, but he needs to think a little differently to succeed. He needs to reach out to the other Boys, he needs to do it as a team – he can only succeed as a team. There's just a lot he has to reckon with."

Butcher tries to find that balance with his Boys, but as always with this complicated hero, it's not that simple. "Butcher's the character who you really want to do the right thing and

Victoria Neuman is now Vice President...

Ashley Barrett (Colby Minifie, left).

he almost never, ever does," Kripke says. "But he's aware of it. He knows the call he's supposed to make, he just has to get out of his own way. And boy, talk about performances. Karl gives just a beautiful, heartbreaking performance because he's got to wrestle with a vulnerability he's never had to wrestle with before because he's dying."

He does, however, have a new friend in Jeffrey Dean Morgan, who plays some sort of government agent. "He's instrumental in helping Butcher and adds a new element that can really help Butcher accomplish his goals," Kripke says. "People are really going to love it because watching those two work off each other, it's just like watching two heavyweight

Jeffrey Dean Morgan (left) playing... wait and see.

"Butcher's the character who you want to do the right thing and he almost never does"

fighters, they're just both so good and interesting. The way they spar is fantastic."

Kripke, the former showrunner and creator of *Supernatural*, won't go into any more detail on the character other than referencing how Morgan marks yet another collaboration between himself and an actor from *Supernatural*. "*The Boys* is my ongoing foundation to keep *Supernatural* actors employed and I look forward to employing more of them in future seasons," he adds.

Season four does, though, add two new actors not from the *Supernatural* roster in Susan Heyward as Sister Sage and Valorie Curry as Firecracker. "They're both playing supes and they each bring a completely different energy to the show," Kripke says. "They're a great shot in the arm over at Vought tower."

There's also another new member of the Seven, Black Noir II, after the first iteration died. In the comics, Black Noir is secretly a clone of Homelander – a fail-safe should the actual Homelander ever go too crazy and the →

"Go home! There's nothing to see here!"

world needs someone to stop him. When Noir II's identity is brought up, Kripke becomes cagey. "I will neither confirm nor deny that Black Noir is back," he says. "But I promise, whatever happens, it's going to be very, very funny."

Stopping the Seven will require the Boys to do so in "the absolute goriest way possible." Considering that the third season saw our heroes murder a bunch of supes during a hedonistic orgy (aptly called Herogasm), it's hard to imagine how the next season will ratchet things up again.

"There is certain imagery, for sure, this season, that you'll never be able to get out of your eyeballs," Kripke says. "But we have never had the conversation in the writers' room of like, 'Okay, how do we top last season?' It just doesn't come up. We ask, 'What is the next layer down of their psychology and their trauma and their problems?' That gets harder every season. We're digging pretty deep into these people, and you have to really be disciplined about digging even deeper."

That's not to say there aren't some wildly explicit scenes this season. Kripke says there's "mad stuff" in every episode – and considering that the trailer alone features more blood, guts and superpowered sheep than every modern Marvel movie combined, we believe him. He highlights three episodes in particular that pop into his head as his favourites. "Episodes two, five and six, there are just certain scenes that are fucking insane," he says. "The memes that will come out of the season will be robust."

Kripke's also keen to highlight just how different this season is from what came before. "We try to make every season feel different," he says. "This season plays more like a political thriller, of politics in Washington and elections and who's plotting to do what, with a lot of really emotional, almost existential issues.

"I love this season, it might be our funniest season; it makes me laugh the most. If people fucking love it, I'll be relieved. But if people fucking hate it, I'll be like, 'Yeah, that was a possibility.' I'm not bullshitting you, I genuinely have no idea whether this season's going to work."

When *SFX* says season four sounds like *The West Wing* meets *The Boys*, Kripke counters: "There's some in there, but we also take hilarious detours. Some episodes have some political content and others are just absolutely batshit bananas. We dance around. There's quite a lot for people to chew on... and maybe gag on."

How many more seasons will *The Boys* continue? A fifth season has been confirmed, but nothing beyond that. "Without saying how many seasons are left, the show is ultimately the Boys vs Homelander, and that has to come

Sage (Susan Heyward) and Firecracker (Valorie Curry).

Jack Quaid as Hughie Campbell.

Kimiko (Karen Fukuhara) sneaks in.

"Don't look now, but there's an angry mob."

Homelander (Antony Starr) with a young pal.

> **There is certain imagery that you'll never be able to get out of your eyeballs**

to a head, that can't go on forever," Kripke says. "That having been said, I am – without hyperbole – literally the worst person in history at predicting how long their show should go. No one in the entire history of the entertainment business has been more wrong than me, giving interview after interview on how I thought *Supernatural* should end after five years [the series went on for 15 seasons].

"So I would be crazy to speculate on how many seasons any show should go. I'm not going to make that same mistake again. But, yes, I do have an ending in mind."

When *The Boys* does come to an end, it may not conclude the BCU. *Gen V* has been commissioned for a second season, while the animated spin-off *The Boys Presents: Diabolical* seems primed for a comeback. Can the franchise continue without its flagship show?

"I'm hopeful it can, as long as the stories are good," Kripke says. "I don't think any of us feel we need to [continue the series] because we have to put our kids through college. We want to do it because there are stories left to be told in an interesting universe. The rule is, if it's a story that you can just tell on *The Boys* then you don't need to do a spin-off. What I like about *Gen V* is that those stories wouldn't work on *The Boys*. So with any other spin-offs – and we're talking about a couple of them – we're only going to do them if they tell stories that we couldn't tell in the other shows, because there's no other reason to do it.

"We're genuinely working our asses off to not be stone-cold sell-outs. It's part of the brand to be punk rock. I'm very conscious and nervous about it because literally, the message of the show is 'Fuck sellouts'.

"We say that in a lot of meetings – I'm like, 'We are not allowed to sell out.' That would be the height of hypocrisy."

The BCU certainly seems to have a long, bountiful future ahead. "It's quite a buffet," Kripke adds. Fuck, yeah.

The Boys is on Prime Video from 13 June.

BOYS WHO LIKE GIRLS...

Chace Crawford and Antony Starr go Deep on *The Boys*

This season, Homelander can't stand the Starlighters...

Antony Starr: In season three, when he heard that people were protesting him at Victor Neuman's rally, he couldn't believe that. So, what does he do? He shows up. This season is an extension of that, it's the next step. In season four, the battle lines are drawn in no uncertain terms.

He's got more of an awareness now he's evolved and he's learned how far he can go and what he can get away with. Now it's about extending that thought even further and really pushing the boat out and seeing where the boundaries are, or if there are any boundaries at all.

He's also really starting to focus on mortality and legacy and how his son factors into that. How can he be the best version of himself for his son? That leads to Homelander's version of therapy, which is going back to where it all began, going back to quote-unquote home, which was quite an experience. There's some pretty unhinged stuff in season four.

What can we expect from the Deep this season? More fish antics?

Chace Crawford: Oh, he still loves [his octopus] Ambrosius. His mistress is a little outlet emotionally and sexually. But at the end of the last season, Homelander was testing him, pushing the boundaries of what he's willing to do. This season, we get a little more feisty – he's definitely exploding in anger a few times, and we see him lean into that. Maybe he's trying to copy Homelander a little. There's anger and violence which I've always wanted to see more of. The arc is really, really fun this season. I get to do some cool stuff. And Ambrosius is still around. She's beautiful.

What do you feel makes this season different to the last?

Starr: The shape of the season is structured very differently because of Annie leaving the Seven. That really separates the camps, the Seven and the Boys. It feels more divided, more separated. You know, we live in very divided times and I know that the writers like to reflect on the social climate and the world.

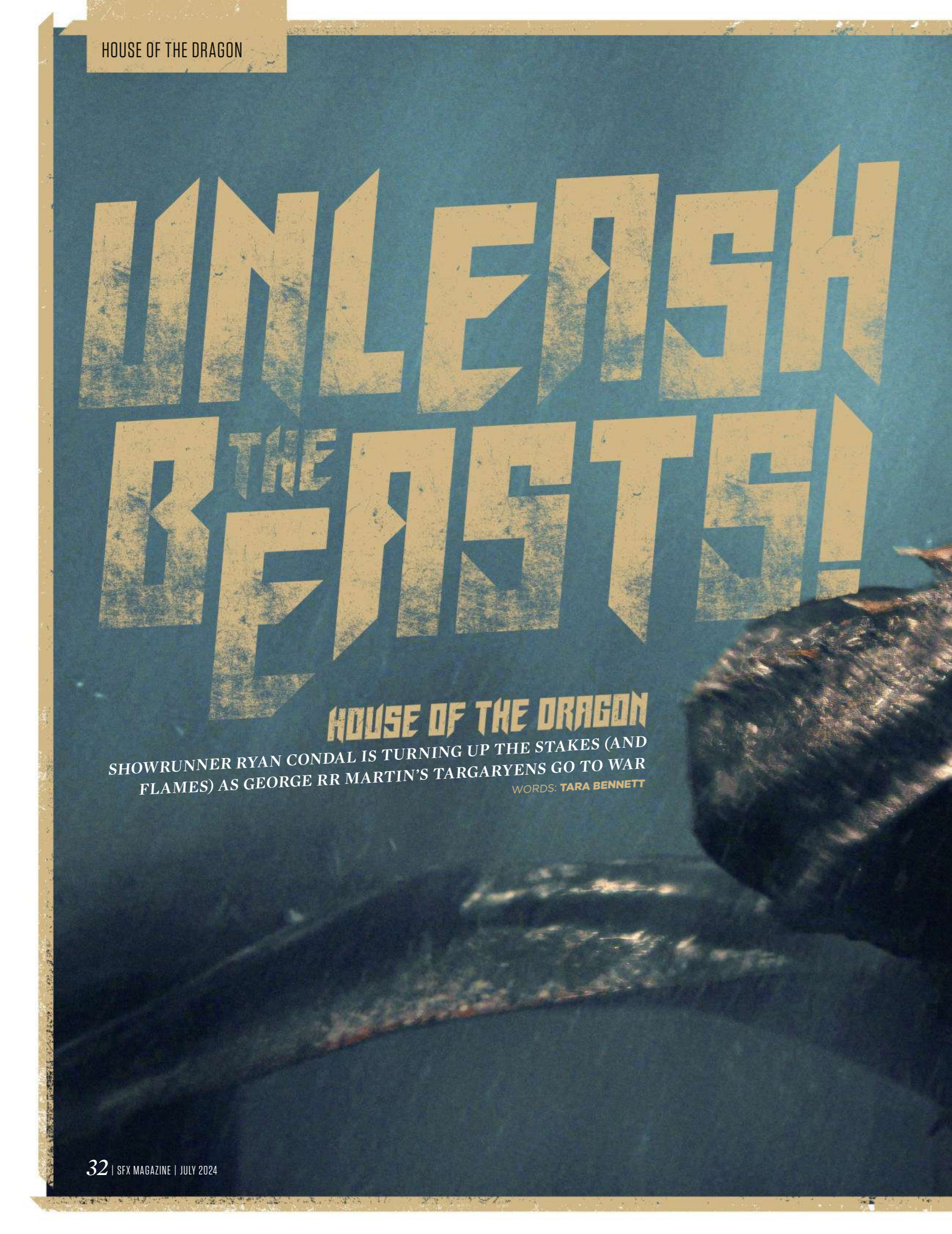
It's a really interesting landscape to build the show. One of the great things about the characters is that every season they are evolving, they keep growing, like real people. As a template to work on it leads to a really interesting season.

UNLEASH THE BEASTS!

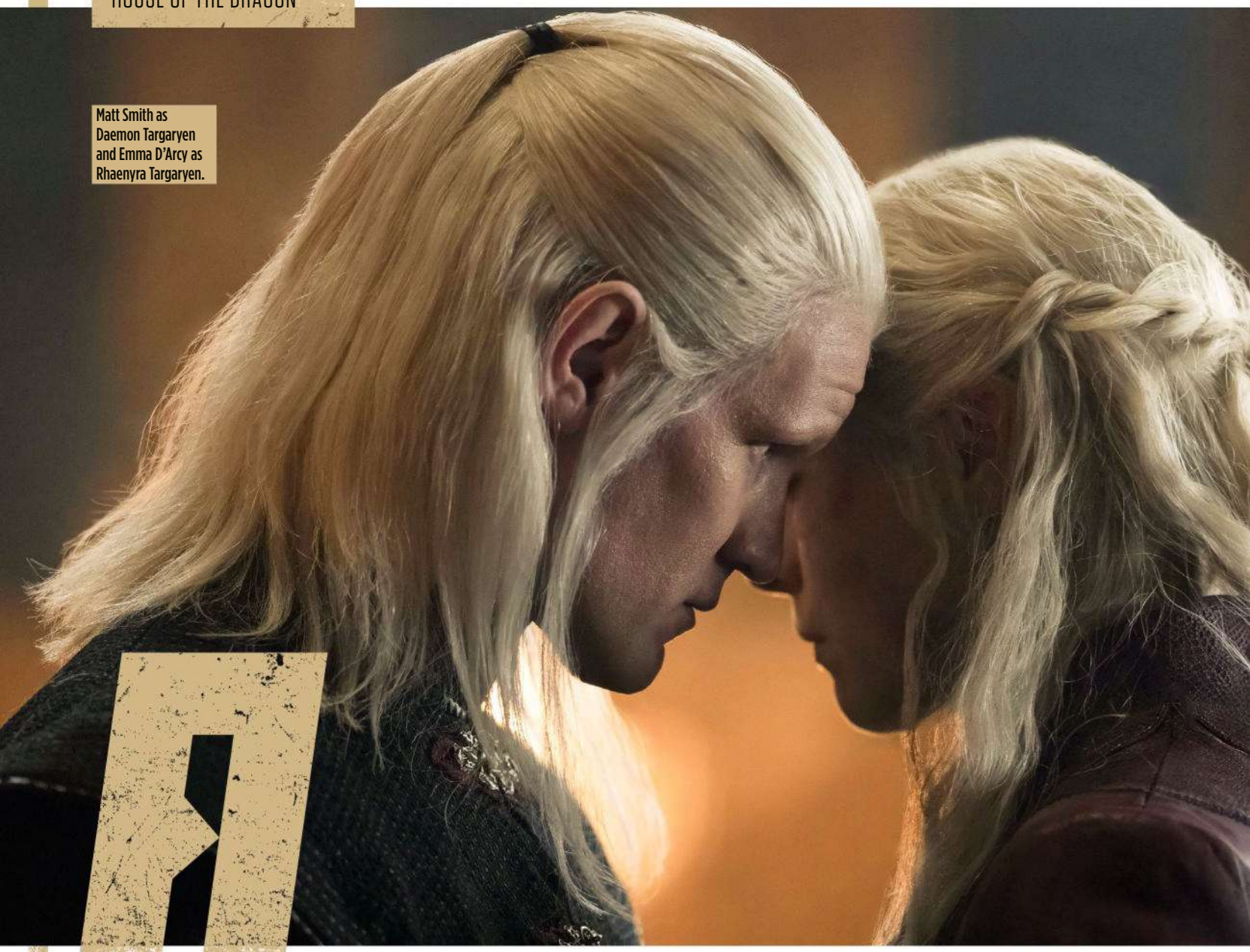
HOUSE OF THE DRAGON

SHOWRUNNER RYAN CONDAL IS TURNING UP THE STAKES (AND FLAMES) AS GEORGE RR MARTIN'S TARGARYENS GO TO WAR

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**



TYPE: SYLVERARTS/GETTY



Matt Smith as Daemon Targaryen and Emma D'Arcy as Rhaenyra Targaryen.

AFTER ALMOST A two-year wait, it's time to collect your chain mail and dragon kibble: Westeros is ready to rumble once more. The first season of *House Of The Dragon* left audiences in fear for House Targaryen when by season's end, fans – spoiler alert – witnessed King Viserys Targaryen's (Paddy Considine) nauseating death. That left an even messier line of succession for his kin to fight over.

On one side is his firstborn daughter and heir apparent, Rhaenyra Targaryen (Emma D'Arcy), in whom Viserys confided secret prophecies, and who enjoyed his favour. On the other side is Rhaenyra's depraved and entitled half-brother Aegon II Targaryen (Tom Glynn-Carney). A leader he is not, yet he's persuaded by his mother, Dowager Queen Alicent Hightower (Olivia Cooke) and the Small Council to grab that power. His move to do so provokes a split in the realm as allies and enemies align into two camps: Team Green for King Aegon and Team Black for Queen Rhaenyra, who claims the throne as her own. Call season one the amuse-bouche in terms of setting up the warfare, while season two is set to serve a full-course meal.

Of course, all of this Westeros regal strife and political machination (with dragon accoutrement) is the concoction of author George RR Martin, who began telling the imaginary world's complex history in *A Game Of Thrones* (1996), the first entry in his planned seven-book series *A Song Of Ice And Fire*. Screenwriters David Benioff and DB Weiss had eight seasons to tell that story, and now writer/showrunner Ryan Condal (*Colony*) is adapting *Fire & Blood*, Martin's prequel history of the House Targaryen's nasty war of succession known as the "Dance Of The Dragons".

As the first of several developed spin-off/prequel series to actually get made, *House Of The Dragon* arrived with plenty of expectations and trepidation attached from both book readers and *Game Of Thrones* viewers. Both were equally wary after the finale season of *Thrones* underwhelmed across the board. But in just eight episodes, Condal and company were able to wash that bitter taste away and get audiences invested in their *Thrones* prequel.

Already in the process of writing season three as season two readies to launch, Condal takes a pause to assess with *SFX* his own game in the crafting of season one. "The thing I think we did well was really stepping into the world of *Game Of Thrones* and honouring the long and venerated history before us," Condal says of establishing the series. "Also in creating something new, because at the start of [this show], it's some 150 years before Daenerys

Steve Toussaint (Lord Corlys) and Eve Best (Rhaenys Targaryen).

Ser Criston Cole (Fabien Frankel), Aemond Targaryen (Ewan Mitchell).

Olivia Cooke as Queen Alicent Hightower: in trouble.

Targaryen is even born and almost 200 years before the events of *Game Of Thrones*. This was a different period of high decadence in the kingdom than it's ever been. The Targaryens are in power. There are 13 or 14 dragons at this time, with more to come, and they also haven't known war in half a century."

Condal and Martin chose to use the childhood best friends Rhaenyra and Alicent to walk audiences through decades of their lives of current Targaryen relationships. As both girls-turned-women are used as pawns for the power goals of others, framing the show through their eyes makes the politicking more personal as the road to war is approached.

"As children, they were close friends and they certainly understood the politics of court, but you see them become pawns in that first episode, both of them," Condal says. "Rhaenyra being played as the heir to the throne, or the bane to her uncle Daemon [Matt Smith], and then Alicent is sort of deftly and venally manipulated by her father. You see all of that at the end of episode one. Then in episode eight, they are experienced women of the state. They sit on not warring sides, but there are the in-laws and the outlaws of this one family."

> **"It is a very challenging adaptation, and I say that as a compliment to the text"**

As warmongers assemble around the two and separate them further, a great sense of unstoppable tragedy seems to swallow them whole by the end of season one. "Neither one of them have we established as characters who are bloodthirsty for a war that's going to cost hundreds of thousands of lives, so one of them can sit on a chair of swords at the end of it," Condal says. "But they are both active and helpless in the lot in life that they've been given because of the nature of monarchy and power, patriarchy and just the feudal system of law and how it works."

Right out of the gate in season two, Condal says, "Both women will be faced with much higher stakes than who's going to marry who. Or who has a bastard for a son or a true born son, or who has the firstborn. They are schooled for this, in a way, but also totally unprepared because the world has not seen this situation. No one in living memory has seen this, an actual war for the throne. The last one was probably fought 80 years ago at this point.

"They've read the history books, but they haven't lived through it," he continues regarding what they're staring down. "And certainly not a true civil war within the family. The realm is going to get involved and there are dragons on either side of the equation. But that's why we're dramatising this period of history, because *this* is the war that Daenerys thinks about and Sansa thinks about and Cersei thinks about in the original series. That's why George wanted to tell this story and I think that's why this is the one that got made first."

Phia Saban as Queen Helaena Targaryen.

Condal says that if season one was about Rhaenyra and Alicent being unaware of their true power, this season will give it to them, and then test them both with regards to how they use it. "Rhaenyra has never had this amount of power in her life and how does she react to that? What does that do to a person?" he poses.

"Then on Alicent's side, whether she's realised it or not, she had great power the moment she got married to Viserys. She ceded that power away the moment she put the crown on Aegon's head. How is that going to land on her, and how is she going to react to that now that she's the Dowager Queen at the ripe old age of probably 33?" Condal chuckles.

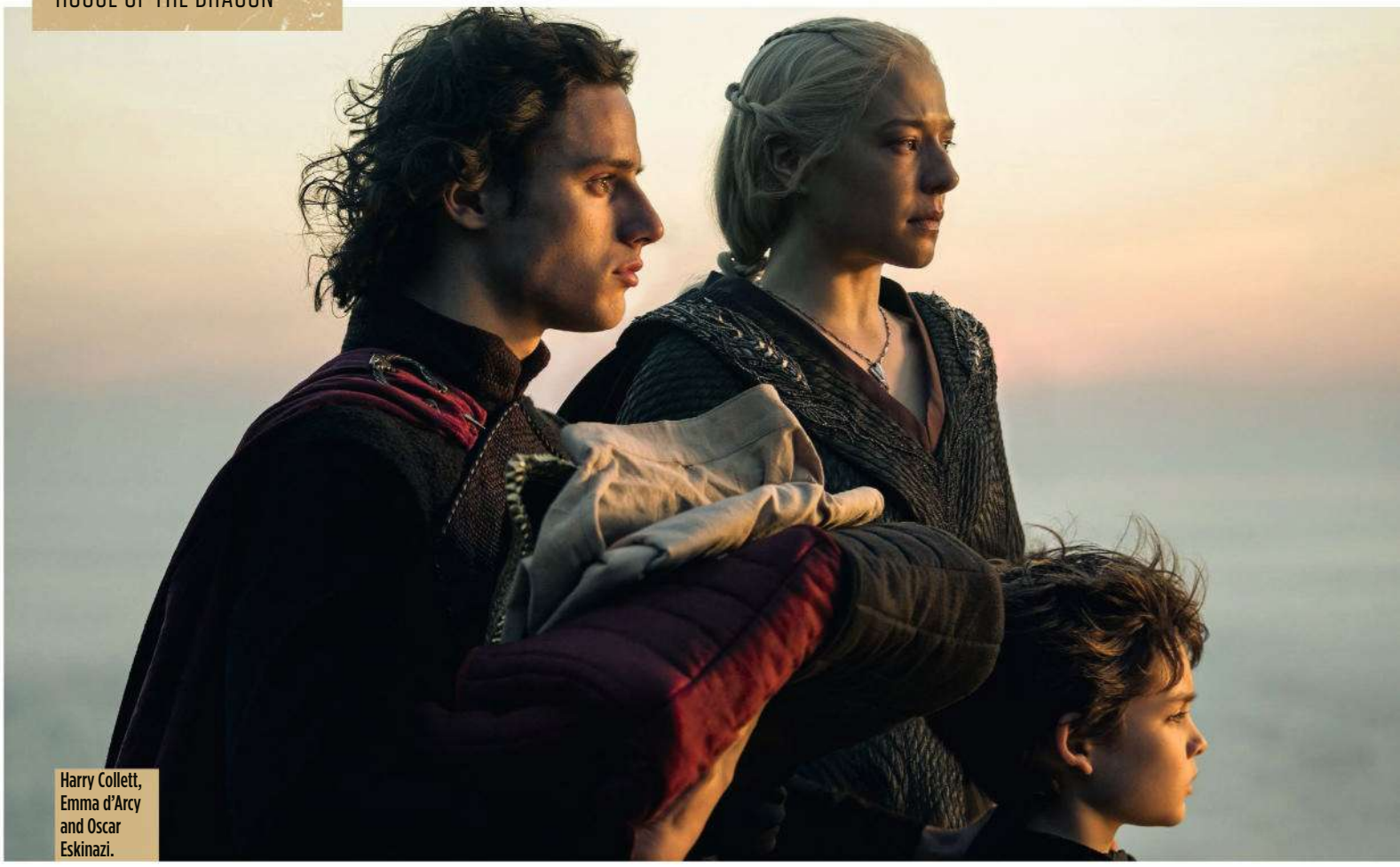
NOVEL APPROACH

If you haven't cracked open Martin's *Fire & Blood*, it's written more like a historical record of the "Dance Of The Dragons" period, rather than typical prose.

"It is a very challenging adaptation," Condal acknowledges. "I say that as a compliment to the text. It's a history book written in a *Rashomon* style, so even the history that's being laid out is not necessarily the definitive history because there are disagreements. There are also giant holes by design," he says of the unreliable narrator of it all.

"We know that point A was here, and they got to point C, but we don't have the records, nor were we privy to the Private Council chamber, Palace chamber or bedchamber conversations that led to these choices. We know what the characters are doing but we don't know anything really about their internal lives and the reasons they're making the decisions.

"So it gives us, as the storytellers on the screenwriting side of the equation, tremendous licence to imbue complex character into these individuals."



Harry Collett, Emma d'Arcy and Oscar Eskinazi.

"We have a ton more dragons this season, with new personalities and colours"

Condal continues, "The challenge is how do you remain faithful to the text, but also render a complex, three-dimensional story that is not laid out in the text of the history book? We only have a couple of dozen pages per season of story to cover, so we have to flesh it out. We have to expand without inventing too much," he says, alluding to hyper-protective Martin fans. "It's about trying to hold the line. I'm not going to be 100% successful at that. I don't think anybody can be for every fan."

Asked what guides his decision-making regarding what to pick from the source material, Condal says he divines some of it from his frequent conversations with Martin. "And for some, we just have to rely on the characters that we established in season one and ask, 'What would Daemon do under these circumstances, in these situations?'

"I would say that's easier to do because once you've read the book as many times as I have and once you lay it out end to end – because it is told very linearly – the things that need to be dramatised sort of reveal themselves rather easily."

A perk of telling Targaryen tales of the past is that dragons factor heavily into this show. The creatures are ubiquitous at the time, and Condal promises that they will be the ultimate weapons of war. He hasn't been afraid to feature them liberally, especially in show-stopping sequences like the Arrax vs Vhagar battle in the first season finale. But he promises that audiences haven't seen anything yet.

"We have a whole ton more this season, with new personalities and colours, silhouettes and sounds and behaviours, and all these things," he teases. "It's challenging to keep track of because they are characters in their own right. On a practical level, they're big, they're expensive, they're time-consuming, so you really have to pick your spots where you're going to dive in and do the really challenging stuff that can suck resources out of the show quickly."

He continues, "I'm very proud with the way we pulled off the dragons in season one. That's all credit to my excellent directors and crew.

Matthew Needham plays Lord Larys Strong.

The vendors of the visual effects houses that modelled and then animated and brought those dragons to life, it's really an accomplishment. As great as a sequence that was in episode 10, I think we've raised the bar in season two.

"In making any of these big shows or big movies, you get into an arms race with yourself," he says. "Sometimes it's bigger and badder and more expensive. Other times, it's just, 'What haven't we seen before? What's the new thing to see?'

"So we actually have a bunch of [dragon] things, but there's two particular huge sequences that we've done this season. I think we have outdone ourselves, and I'm quite proud of both of these sequences as a visual execution spectacle, but also on a storytelling level with what happens with them, and the way the world was before and the way the world is afterwards."

Aside from fire lizards and bloody conflict, there's the complex and twisted love affair of uncle and niece/husband and wife Daemon and Rhaenyra Targaryen. A portion of the fandom fell hard for this troubled duo, and were aghast when he almost choked her in the season finale. With Rhaenyra fighting for a throne that Daemon also believes is rightfully his, that marital disharmony is unlikely to disappear in season two.

Of that controversial physical moment, Condal sort of smiles and observes, "I love how everybody was totally okay with Daemon, who's Rhaenyra's uncle and 20 years older than

What's Aemond cooking up next?

Having a bit of a brood is all the rage in Westeros.

Ser Otto Hightower (Rhys Ifans) with Alicent.

Sonoya Mizuno as Mysaria "The White Worm".

her. They were totally okay with *that* until he put his hands on her. It's very interesting. I think the blonde wigs and the dragons excuse a lot of questionable behavior," he jokes.

In all seriousness, he continues that Daemon and Rhaenyra's adult relationship, as played by Smith and D'Arcy, is going to be an ongoing study of that marriage. "There's a very deep exploration of that in season two that picks up where we left off," Condal says. "Daemon has a lot of demons from his very recent past that he has not dealt with.

"His brother dying and Rhaenyra ascending to the throne does not really help any of that for him. In many ways, it makes it more real and present and in his face. It reminds him of the fact that Viserys passed him over, which is the reason that the character put his hand on Rhaenyra's throat. It was because she laughed at him, suggesting that Viserys trusted her more to be his heir than he did his own brother.

"Because Viserys brought Rhaenyra into his secret when she was a child and he never told Daemon about it, I think that just broke him," Condal muses. "That doesn't just go away. I mean, he's Daemon so he's like, 'Well, I'll just focus all of my anger into hatred for the Hightowers.' He's essentially setting out on this pogrom to eliminate everybody that wears green from the world, and that'll last for some time.

"The story that I'm most particularly proud of this year is Daemon's story," he says. "It was very hard to break and very challenging to dramatise and film and then edit. But in the end, I think we succeeded and we stuck the landing on it. He's still very much Daemon. But it further excavates Daemon's haunted past. I'm excited for the fans to see it. It all comes back to the nature of his relationship to Rhaenyra. Is that as husband and wife? Is it as uncle and niece? Or is it as heir to the throne and also ran? Maybe it can be all three of those things."

Condal promises that viewers who got a mini-degree in Targaryen history watching season one will be rewarded this year with a host of emotional pay-offs and surprises.

"The reason that we wanted to spend so much time in the pre-war phase in all of season one is because we wanted you to know and understand the complex character dynamics that lead us to these people in their adult lives. So that when we do branch out in season two, and start exploring these characters as these very big stakes come into play, we understand what came before and what is driving them and confounding them and keeping them up at night," he says.

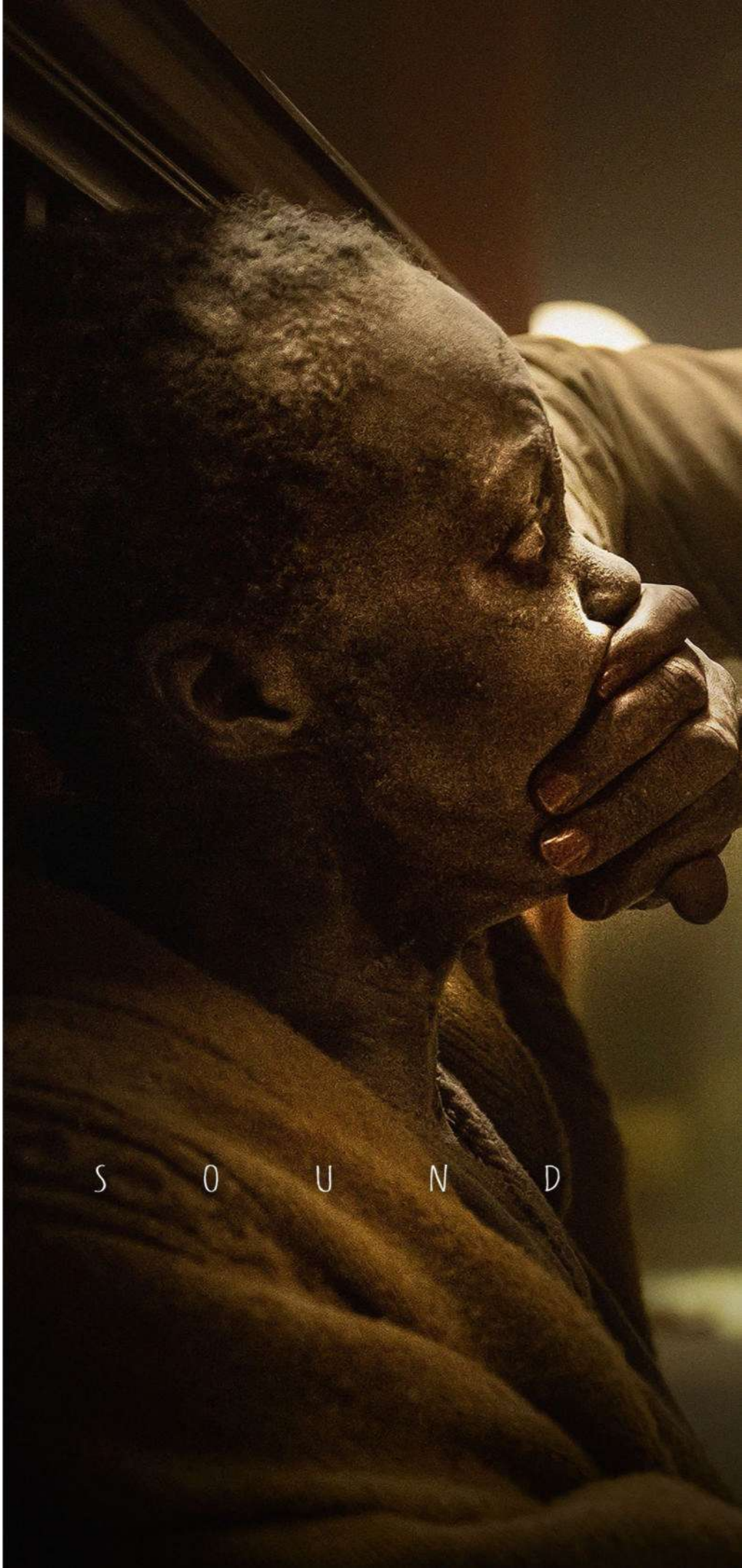
"The marketing campaign will sell this as: Are you Team Green or Team Black? That's a really fun way to market a fantasy show. But what I'm interested in as a dramatist, in creating and writing this show, is the complex, individual characters on both sides of this conflict, because that's what makes for interesting and unpredictable stories and a fascinating Greek tragedy."

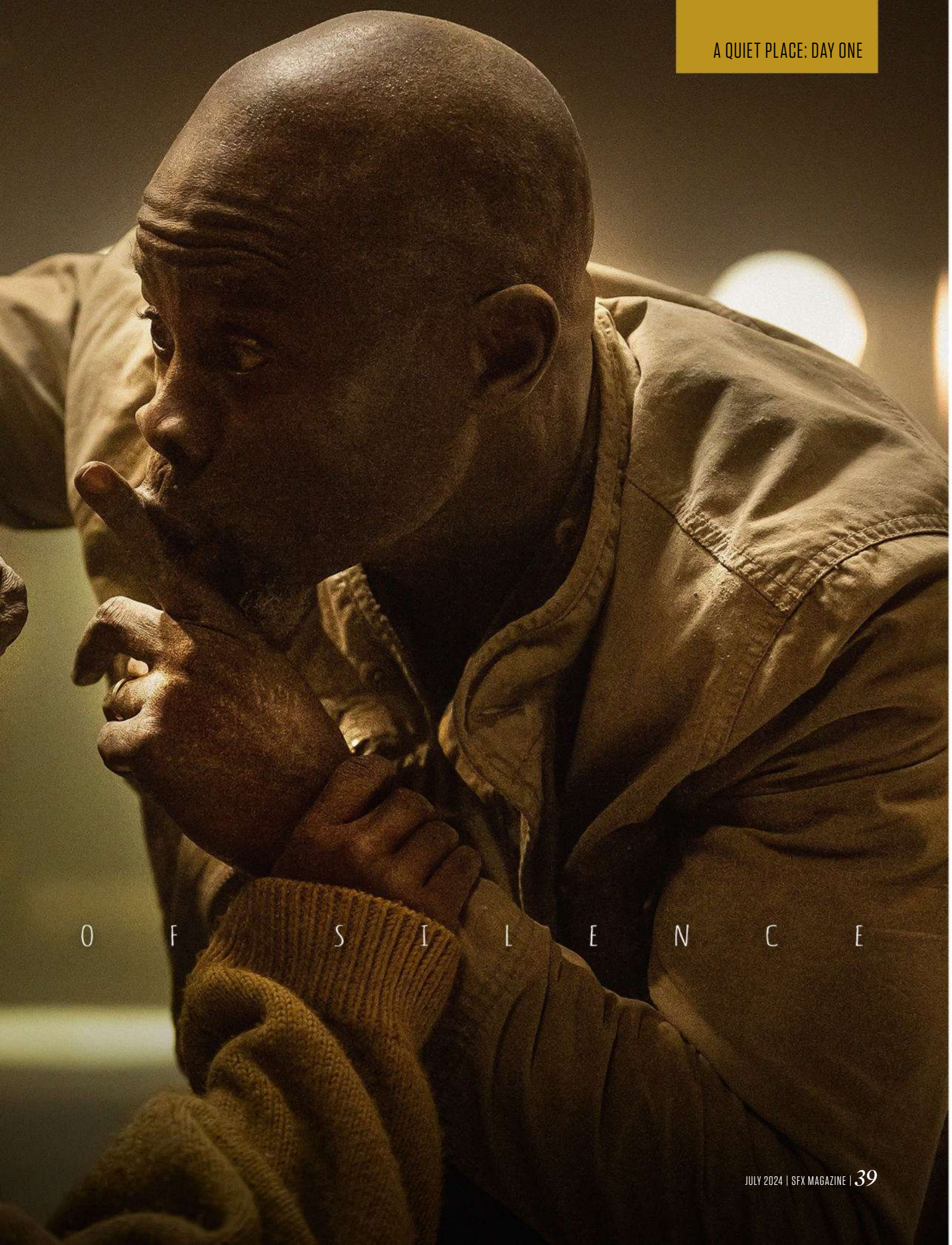
House Of The Dragon is on Max (US) from 16 June and Sky Atlantic (UK) from 17 June.

WITH A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE **WE FINALLY GO BACK TO THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY. STARS LUPITA NYONG'O AND JOSEPH QUINN TALK ABOUT HOW THIS FILM BREATHES NEW LIFE INTO THE FRANCHISE**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

THE SOUND




OF SILENCE

THE FIRST *QUIET PLACE* FROM 2018 was a model example of in medias res, a film that dropped us into the middle of an unimaginable dystopia, 471 days after the Earth was invaded by an army of visually impaired ETs. Yet while 2020's *A Quiet Place Part II* included an 11-minute pre-title sequence finally depicting that first attack, there's still much we don't know about how the world of *A Quiet Place* came to be.

That's all about to change.

By the end of *Part II*, we were 477 days into the alien occupation. Now, spin-off movie *A Quiet Place: Day One* rewinds the story to the very beginning, while moving the focus away, for the first time, from the Abbott clan. The result promises to be a markedly different kind of *Quiet Place* film.

FOUND FAMILY

"I would say it has a different tone, as you're following new characters," Lupita Nyong'o, who plays Samira in the new movie, tells *SFX*. "In the two previous films, the connectivity of the characters is intrinsic because they're family, so you immediately understand why they need to stay together.

"With this, we're meeting characters that are only brought together by this catastrophe, so it's like, how do two people who are perfect strangers react to survival moments such as this? That offers a new kind of tension and new friction to this universe."

Nyong'o is keeping schtum as to her character's background ("Oh, I can't tell you that!" she laughs, when *SFX* attempts to probe her about Samira's profession), but the trailer suggests she isn't as battle-hardened as Emily Blunt's Evelyn Abbott had become by the time of the first film.

One thing that is clear, however, is that she's buddied up for much of the movie by another character fresh to the franchise, played by Brit actor – and soon-to-be Human Torch – Joseph Quinn. "His name is Eric and he's very far away from home at the beginning of the film," Quinn, who gets to act in his own accent for a change, tells us. "The idea of loss and grief and self-preservation and why they're trying to survive is fairly understandable in the first two films, because they're family, whereas in this one we're meeting two strangers that approach mortality and this armageddon in a very different way."

This is no run-of-the-mill, spur-of-the-moment, knocked-off spin-off. Instead *Day One* promises to be a distinct, full-blooded movie in its own right, simply one that's adjacent to two of the biggest crossover horrors of the past six years – films which both Nyong'o and Quinn are fans of.

"I really liked the premise of *A Quiet Place*," beams Nyong'o, who has history with the genre, having headlined in Jordan Peele's *Us*. "But what I loved most of all is that they're very character-driven. You really invest in the lives of these people, as you learn about what it's like to live in a quiet world. So when they're in danger, you're so much in their perspective."

"I watched the first one in the theatre," Quinn remembers of that 2018 movie, which grossed over $341 million worldwide against a $17 million budget.

"I had such a fantastic experience watching this brilliant, horrifying and powerful film. Obviously the second movie was a big success as well, so when I heard that they were doing a third I was thinking, 'I wonder what they're going to do with it?'"

What indeed? *Day One* is the first *Quiet Place* movie not to be written or directed by John Krasinski. Instead, it's masterminded by indie darling Michael Sarnoski who in 2021 won dynamite reviews for his debut feature *Pig*.

"I'd watched *Pig*, and was a big fan," says Quinn of Sarnoski's Nic Cage-starring drama. "Seeing a franchise as revered and well-

Of *course* the British character wears a suit.

Djimon Hounsou as Henri.

Director Michael Sarnoski (right).

IT'S OH SO QUIET

Who would and wouldn't survive in the world of *A Quiet Place*?

If the world really was invaded by blind extraterrestrials with a keen sense of hearing, some people would be naturally better at surviving than others. We wouldn't, for instance, bet on Brian Blessed or Alan Carr living more than a day before being ripped apart by a Death Angel. So which of the cast members of *Day One* would be best and worst at navigating a world where any kind of noise is likely to get you killed?

"Oh, I would have trouble because I like to talk to myself," smiles Lupita Nyong'o. "Like when I'm stressed out, I talk to myself and give myself pep talks to get me through. So the very thing I'd need to do to stay alive would be the thing that killed me."

"Alex Wolff wouldn't be good at staying quiet," says Joseph Quinn. "I don't think I'd do well either. I think Lupita would last the longest, to be honest."

And who does Nyong'o believe would be the cast member most likely to survive?

"Oh, Djimon Hounsou," she laughs. "Hands down!"

STUDIO CANAL

Samira (Lupita Nyong'o) and Eric (Joseph Quinn).

realised as this one in the hands of a different voice was very intriguing. Then the fact that Lupita was doing it was like, 'Okay, this is *very* interesting now.'"

"Michael was wonderful to work with," Nyong'o adds. "I think that what makes him a unique choice for this is that he has the ability to make very dark and violent material that's tender and has heart, and he brought that to this story. I was surprised at the depth of feeling that goes into the story, even as you're achieving all these huge-scale, horrific moments."

"He's got a very distinct voice and knows what he wants, and both of us had an enormous amount of trust in him," Quinn says of his director. "It was fantastic watching him do his thing in this studio environment. He's an indie filmmaker and it was cool watching him in this traditionally Hollywood world, and he handled it expertly."

Though *Day One* has a fresh face at the wheel, that doesn't mean that John Krasinski is entirely absent. As well as directing the first film, Krasinski co-wrote the screenplay with Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, and was the solo writer and director on *Part II*.

While he wasn't behind the camera or typewriter on this one, he does share a "Story by" credit on *Day One*, alongside Sarnoski, and was on-set for the first day of shooting, "to bless us off", as Nyong'o puts it.

"It was actually John who pitched the movie to me," the Oscar-winning actress reveals, "and he told me he never intended for *A Quiet Place* to be a franchise. The only reason why he moved forward with the second film, and now this third one, was because he wanted to, with each film, offer something new to the genre.

"He achieved that by hiring Michael Sarnoski, because he's done something really new, and I think unique, with the genre – staying true to it, but breathing real fresh air into it as well."

While *Day One* promises to be a different kind of *Quiet Place* story, there are certain tropes from the franchise that have to be observed – otherwise, well, it's not a *Quiet Place* movie. Though the film offers up plenty of noise and fury before and during that initial attack, after that the rules of survival are still the same: stay quiet and you'll be okay. Make a sound and you're toast.

"It reminded me of being a kid and playing 'the floor is lava', that game that kids play when they jump on the furniture," Nyong'o says. "In that game, everybody agrees on the rules and sticks to them and it affects every single movement you make.

"It's the same with *A Quiet Place* – we had to keenly listen to each other and react to every single noise. That created a very exciting acting experience because you never know what's going to happen. One person could step on something on the ground that wasn't written into the script, but we can all hear it, so you need to react to it. So there was a spontaneity that was very exciting."

While acting with precious little dialogue is new to Nyong'o, working with special effects isn't. As a veteran of two *Black Panther* movies, and having mo-capped the character of Maz Kanata in three *Star Wars* flicks, she's a dab hand at greenscreen work and acting opposite things that are dropped in in post. But she says the unique premise of *A Quiet Place: Day One* meant that the acting challenges were different to her work in the MCU.

"In some ways, I felt more supported in this," she ponders. "The rule of the game is that the world is quiet, and so yes, there were monsters that we needed to react to, but every noise was the enemy. So the added things, the creatures and everything like that, yes, the other films that I've done have definitely oiled my wheels in that department, but I enjoyed having that one rule to always play with in every scene."

While those two *Black Panther* films helped prep Nyong'o for working on *Day One*, for Joseph Quinn, it's the other way round. Okay, he'd done a season of *Stranger Things* before this (he played the *Dungeons & Dragons*-loving Eddie Munson in series four), but this was the first effects-heavy movie for the actor – which which will have certainly helped for Matt Shakman's forthcoming *Fantastic Four* movie.

"It requires you to use your imagination in different ways," Quinn says about his first experience on a big-budget effects film. "But there's also something that's quite practical about bluescreens and stuff, you just get used to them popping up. I mean, it didn't feel a million miles away from what I was used to on *Stranger Things*, but it was still an adjustment."

Rest assured, *Quiet Place* fans, *Day One* isn't a permanent steer away from the story of the Abbott family. Though it doesn't have a release date yet, Krasinski is inked to write, direct – and who knows, maybe cameo in – *A Quiet Place Part III* sometime in 2025 or 2026.

As regards a direct sequel to this film, however, neither Nyong'o nor Quinn say they know about any plans, and both claim there's no talk yet about them guesting in *Part III* (though there is a connection between *Day One* and *Part II* in Djimon Hounsou's Henri).

But while Nyong'o doesn't rule out a follow-up for her and Quinn, she does suggest that this series has infinite possibilities going forward, telling stories that don't necessarily involve Samira, Eric or Evelyn Abbott.

"What I love about this whole franchise," she enthuses, "is that in this alien invasion story, there are so many opportunities to follow different people on day one itself. We narrow in on these two characters, but there's how many billion people in the world...? This franchise could go on forever!"

A Quiet Place: Day One is in cinemas from 28 June.

Safe to say Samira's not having the best day.

RAPMANS DELIGHT

RAPPER-TURNED-SHOWRUNNER RAPMAN TALKS *SFX* THROUGH HIS NEW SUPER-POWERED SERIES SUPACELL – JUST DON'T CALL THEM HEROES

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

TYPE: EPIFANTSEV/GETTY

TOM HOLLAND. BENEDICT Cumberbatch. Henry Cavill. A frankly ludicrous number of British actors have portrayed superheroes on-screen, yet few of them have played *British* heroes on-screen.

Thank Odin, then, for Andrew Onwubolu aka Rapman, who wants to finally give the United Kingdom a group of superheroes to be proud of. Except don't call his new Netflix series *Supacell* a superhero show... "You know, I call it more of a superpower show," he corrects *SFX*, "because they're not superheroes. Well, not yet!"

Michael (Tosin Cole) gathers his group of "heroes".

ORIGIN STORY

Supacell centres on five South Londoners who have seemingly nothing in common except that one day, they all start developing powers. Why? It's not clear – there's no electrical storm or radioactive spider, though a sinister corporation seems to be involved.

We do know, though, that Michael, played by *Doctor Who*'s Tosin Cole, can teleport, freeze time and see the future, and if he doesn't bring the five new people together, his fiancée is going to die.

Saving her will be no small feat, as these five characters couldn't be more different from one another: there's Sabrina (Nadine Mills), an NHS worker with unstable telekinesis; Andre (Eric Kofi-Abrefa), a down-on-his-luck father with super strength; Rodney (Calvin Demba), a drug dealer with super-speed; and Tazer (Josh Tedeku), a gang leader with a grudge, a knife and invisibility. To help locate the others, Michael has a list of names provided to him by his future self – but that's it.

"The powers that these characters have are my favourite powers in the sense that they are the ones I get most excited about and would love to see on screen," Rapman – previously behind the record-breaking film *Blue Story* and YouTube r(h)apsody *Shiro's Story* – explains. "From there, it was about which characters would make these powers exciting, or which character would most struggle or benefit from these powers.

"Michael, for example, is just a lovely guy; the teleportation and time-freezing became something that he needed when chasing these people. For Andre, he's a big imposing guy, but even with super-strength, he's mentally struggling to get back onto his feet. And with Rodney, super-speed, as a drug dealer, seems like the best thing in the world for getting to your customers quick."

Those are the characters who enjoy their superpowers. Sabrina, though, struggles with controlling her telekinesis – not ideal for a nurse who needs to be delicate dealing with patients – and desperately wants her powers to go away. Meanwhile, Tazer's the most volatile of the lot. "If you're in his world, that is the most dangerous power you can have," Rapman continues. "Who wants to flip a murderer that's invisible? That's scary."

Supacell's characters are taken from Rapman's own life. He explains how he grew up in Tazer's world, while many of his friends have gone on to become real-life Michaels – truck drivers on decent pay who want to start families. "Before the Marvel movies became a thing, *Heroes* came out and it blew everybody away," he says. "I felt like, 'Oh, we're getting close now to normal people with powers.'

"Because when I was a kid, I wished I had powers. Then *Misfits* came and that's, 'Oh, they have powers, but it's a bit more comedy.' We were getting closer with *Misfits* and *Heroes*, but it's not quite how it would be in my world if I got powers. I lived in South London and I was like, 'I need to tell this story. I want to tell that story.'"

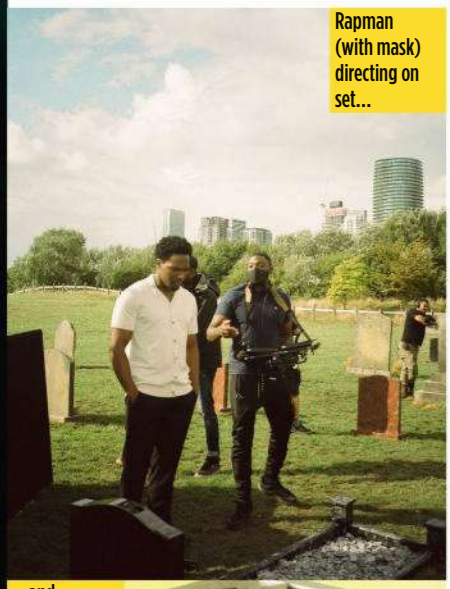
You can watch the moment the nucleus of the idea that would become *Supacell* came to Rapman. Find the BBC Three show *Rapman: Back Of The Bus* (available on iPlayer) and you'll witness him openly wondering what a superhero show in London would look like.

Adelayo Adedayo charms as Dionne.

"That was the first time I actually spoke about it out loud," he says now. "I didn't even know it was an idea in my head. But sometimes when someone asks you a question, the answer comes out and you didn't even know that you had the answer. It was just always sitting at the back of my mind.

"I know the superhero genre, 100%, that's been done to death, but *Supacell* is different – it's a superpower drama about normal people, real people, not people that are martyrs, not people that are going to save the world, just people that try to save themselves and their families. Just what normal people would do."

That philosophy carried through into casting the series, as many of the actors involved are making their screen debuts. "That was one of the biggest things for me," Rapman says. "I hire unknown actors because I like to build new stars. I want to give another person a shot



Rapman (with mask) directing on set...

...and showing rushes to the cast.

Calvin Demba is speedy (ahem) drug dealer Rodney.

at the life – a shot at a career that they wouldn't have had. You've got to go through the door and keep the door open."

That's not to say there isn't some star power involved. Rapman wrote the role of Rodney for Demba, who appeared in *Hollyoaks* before going on to have roles in *Kingsman: The Golden Circle*, *Yardie* and Amazon's *The Rig*. For *Supacell*, Demba fully committed to the role.

"We went to the first read-through, and he's just out back, chilling, with his headphones in, just getting ready," says Rapman. "I go, 'What you listening to, bro?' and he goes, 'Nah, nah, Rodney's just listening to his favourite song.'

"He came in-character all the way through, all the way to the end. You would be on set and, because he's a super-speeder, you would just see Calvin running around the set. I was like, 'We have machines to make it look like you have super-speed. You don't need to run!'"

Also included in the cast is famed character actor Eddie Marsan, as the antagonistic leader of a mysterious corporation that has something to do with our five leading Londoners acquiring powers. "My favourite villain of all time in comic book history is Thanos," Rapman says when quizzed about Marsan's role. "He wasn't all bad, but he wasn't good, he just believed in something and was ready to die for that.

"Those are the best villains, not the ones who want people to suffer and die for no reason. When you see the villains reveal themselves, you're going to see they all had their own reasons. We drip-feed it over the season and just know, there's a method to the madness."

It's those types of mysteries that will have you hooked to *Supacell*, but what really elevates the show are the visual effects. While writing the scripts, Rapman expected to have some pushback from Netflix – that he might be asked to scale things down – but the streamer never made any such demands, and the showrunner, director and writer kept pushing for more.

"I remember doing the deal early on with Netflix and saying, 'I want the show to be bigger than any type of sci-fi show I've seen come out of the UK,'" he says. "I have high ambitions, because if you look at *Heroes*, all the big shows are set in New York City, right? Why can't we have big shows in London? London is a populous city, a massive city, a great city. You always see those Times Square screens, but I want to see Piccadilly Circus screens, I want to see someone flying past that.

"London is such a massive city and England is a massive country, but we're still a little step behind the US when it comes to the scale of TV shows. Why can't we go big? My biggest thing with the VFX, with the locations, was always, can we go bigger?

"I always had this vision of making it as big as I can make it, and I feel like I can go bigger. I almost call season one our prequel season – it's my *Batman Begins*. It will really start with our second season, if we get a second season. That's when I really want to go big."

Rapman is ambitious, that's for sure. Not only does he want *Supacell* to continue for at least another season, but he wants another one after that, too. "In my head, I've got a three-season story," he says. "It doesn't mean it can't go four. I don't want to say it's three seasons, then the show does amazing and we get another three after that.

"But right now, the story hasn't even begun yet. After you watch all six episodes, you'll see what I mean. Season one is the beginning, season two will be the middle, and season three will be the end. That's how I've got it in my head. Where it goes? Who knows. But I always told Netflix, I'm hoping I can tell the story over three seasons."

"Why can't we have big shows in London? London is a populous city, a massive city"

Whether *Supacell* makes it all the way to Rapman's conclusion remains to be seen, but the filmmaker's certainly on the pulse of the genre: knowing what the audience wants, and when not to overstay a welcome. "A lot of people are not happy with these Marvel shows any more, and they say it's too much, they say it's superhero fatigue," he says.

"I don't think it's superhero fatigue, I think the characters, you're just caring less about them. We was invested in Tony Stark, we was invested in Thor, we was invested in the original Avengers, and then they started moving on to new ones. It's hard for us to get to know them, because it's so much about the spectacle, rather than seeing their journeys.

"We see five multimillionaires, and their biggest problem is, 'How do we spend the money today?' Only a few people can relate to that. I've grounded this in South London. The first thing I said when making this wasn't, 'What powers are they going to have?' It was, 'Who are the people we are going to follow?' Every good story starts with the characters."

There's a new group of superpowered beings in town – and they're from South London.

Supacell is on Netflix in June.

SUPER COLE

FORMER THIRTEENTH DOCTOR COMPANION **TOSIN COLE** TALKS GETTING SUPERPOWERS

PORTRAIT: **ASHLEY VERSE**

The show deals with normal people who get superpowers. Was that what attracted you to the script?

You've got these five people from South London but they're all from different walks of life. The one thing they have in common are these powers. It's so grounded and it's so South London, where I'm from. I was like, "I could see some people doing this." It makes it accessible. It doesn't mean thousands of monsters coming down and you have to save the universe. It's just like, "I hope I get some money by the end of this!"

Your character's the leading hero. He can teleport and see the future, yet he still feels like an authentic person.

Michael's a regular guy. He's not too tough, or a gangster or a criminal mastermind. The moment he discovers his powers and finds out his fiancée is going to die in the future, his whole world comes crashing down. That relationship is at the heart of the story. How do you tell the person you love that they're going to die without scaring them? The love between them just pings off the screen.

There was a lot of greenscreen work, but they also recreated parts of London for the set. How did the scale of this project compare to the sort of things you've done before?

It feels next-level. I've never seen South London on that scale. Every time you see London, a heightened version of it, it's always James Bond-type action. But this was South London with South London people.

With the greenscreen, you felt like, "I never thought something like this would happen." The closest thing we've seen is maybe *Attack The Block* and that was years ago. It's about time – it's good to show a different element to the South London that I know.

It's like a full-circle moment. I've done different universes and timelines, but to do this in the preset day is just fantastic.

We're in an age of so-called "superhero fatigue". What makes this different to the other superhero shows out there?

I don't think we're trying to be like a superhero show. There aren't costumes; these are just your regular Joes from down the street, they just happen to have powers.

Our story's got a heart to it; there's a love story, there's a coming of age story, there's a rags to riches story, a hopeless romantic story. There are so many different elements and we just threw it in South London and sprinkled a little bit of sci-fi in there. It's nothing like anything you've seen before.

Rapman has a three-season story planned out. Do you know where Michael's story goes, if you do get a second season?

All I can say is that it starts off one way and it gets crazier the next way. I'm looking forward to part two. Part three, only God knows what's going to happen. Part two, the way Rap's told me when I was signing onto the show, I was like, "Are you sure we can't put some of part two in part one?"

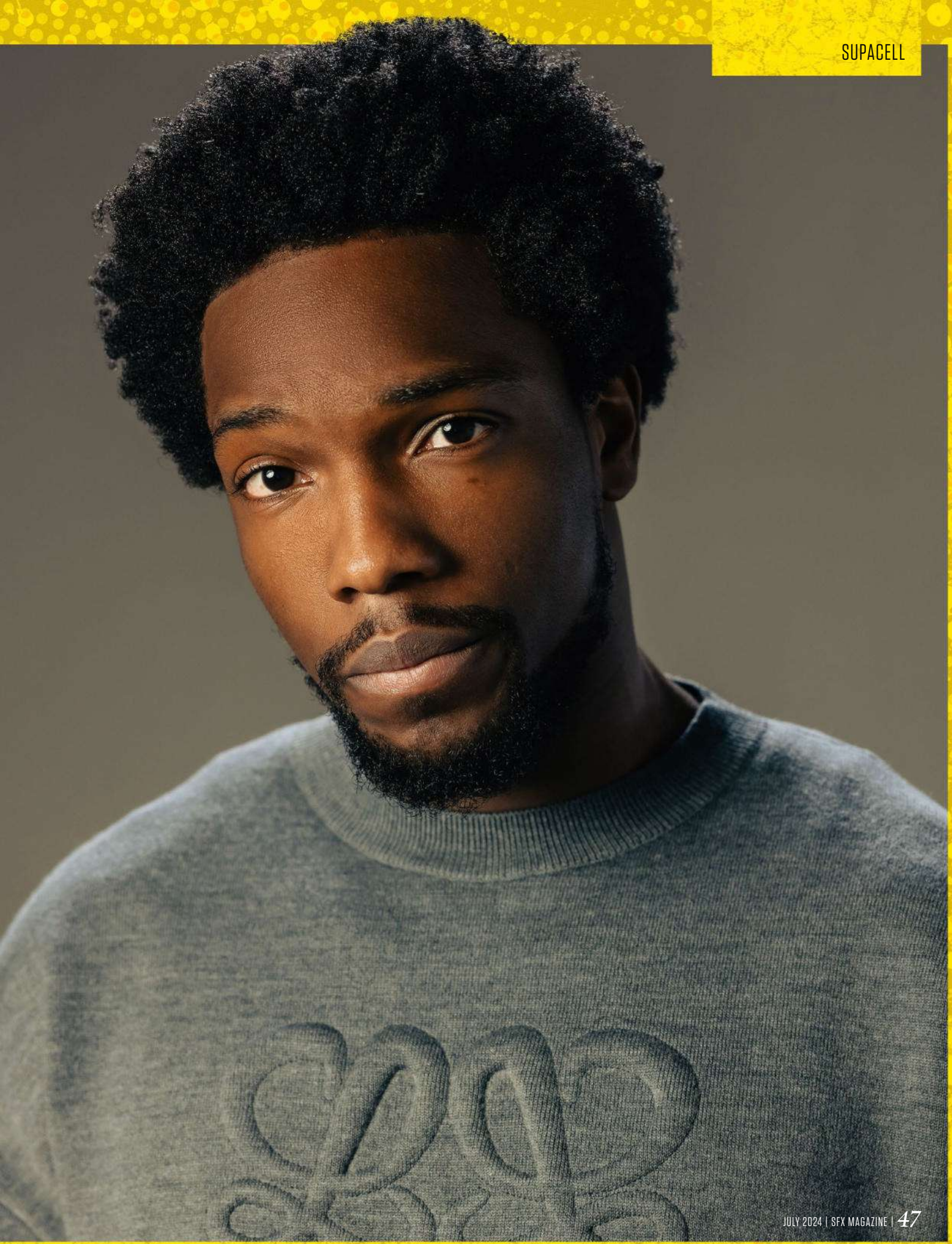
It's going to be crazy. The relationships that we build in the first season, the way it goes, it's going to be a fun next season. This season, we set up the world, the characters and their backstories. Season two, it's just straight running. It's going to be heavy-hitting.

Finally, now that you've been away from *Doctor Who* for some time and there's a new Doctor in town, how do you reflect on that experience?

I saw the poster today and it's crazy, I was like, "That was me a couple of years ago!" It was a blessing. I had a great time. It's opened up so many doors for me. I had a great relationship with Jodie [Whittaker], Mandip [Gill], Bradley [Walsh], we were a deadly quadruple. That's a show that's forever going to be evolving.

I had my chapter, now it's a new chapter. I just smile knowing that I was part of something that was constantly evolving, changing and shifting. It's just history now. Jodie was the first female Doctor, Ncuti [Gatwa]'s the first man of colour. We're progressing. I'm just able to enjoy it.

Tosin Cole as Michael: he's in a bit of trouble.



A STORY

SHOT BACK-TO-BACK, *X* AND *PEARL* WON WRITER/DIRECTOR TI WEST RAVE REVIEWS WHEN THEY WERE RELEASED IN 2022. NOW, TWO YEARS ON, HE'S BACK WITH THE LATEST FILM IN THE "X SERIES", THE '80S-SET SLASHER MAXXXINE

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

STOCK ART: RIKKYAL, KIRSTYPARGETER/GETTY

FOR 2022 SLASHER FLICK *X* and its same-year prequel *Pearl*, director Ti West did the standard amount of press for a low-budget horror, which is to say not a lot. But with his latest film *MaXXXine* (a direct sequel to *X*), things are different. Very different.

"With *X*, no one knew we made that movie," the man born Timon West tells *SFX* about 2022's surprise horror hit (made for $1 million, it ended up grossing $15m). "And then *Pearl* [budget: $1m; box office: $10.1m], no one knew we made that movie either. So this one is the only one that everyone knows has been happening since the very beginning."

The consequence of the critical and commercial success of those films is that *MaXXXine* is arriving with considerably more fanfare than its two under-the-radar predecessors, and that's something of a mixed blessing for its writer/director. "What was cool about the other two is no one knew what they were in for," West points out. "For this, the less you know about the movie, the better."

Maxine with Elizabeth (Elizabeth Debicki).

HOLLYWOOD DREAM

Before we get to *MaXXXine*, let's remind ourselves of how we got here. Released in March 2022, *X* was *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* by way of *Boogie Nights*, a grindhouse-styled slasher set in 1979 where the cast and crew of a dimestore skin flick find themselves targeted by a psychopathic old woman and her homicidal husband.

Second movie *Pearl* (released in September 2022) told the story of that elderly lady as a young girl, dreaming of a life on the silver screen, at the same time as she's discovering a taste for killing. Although part of the same universe, stylistically they were worlds apart – if the crude, unpolished *X* was the bastard child of Tobe Hooper and Mario Bava, *Pearl*'s parentage seemed to be Douglas Sirk and Walt Disney, a gloriously demented riff on the Technicolor melodramas of Hollywood's golden age.

MaXXXine is something wildly different once more. Taking place six years after the first film, it finds Maxine Minx, the final girl of *X*'s kill spree, now in LA, lusting after a career in mainstream Hollywood. Mia Goth is back, making her the only actor to appear in all three movies: she also played Pearl, under heavy prosthetics as an 80-year-old in *X*, and as a fresh-faced teen in the prequel. New faces include Elizabeth Debicki, Michelle Monaghan, Bobby Cannavale, Lily Collins, Giancarlo Esposito, Halsey and Kevin Bacon. A considerably starrier line-up than either of the first two, less generously-budgeted films. It's also, from the look of the trailer, a much more ambitious movie, taking place on a far broader canvas than its tightly-focused predecessors.

"It's much bigger than both of them combined," West beams. "The film is very Hollywood. The environments that Maxine's in are very much the kind of places you come to see as a tourist in LA, so it really leans into the aesthetic of the city. If you've ever come to Los Angeles, people are always trying to sell you stuff like maps to the stars' homes and movie tours and things like that."

West cites Brian De Palma and Italian giallo as inspirations for *MaXXXine*'s gaudy, neon-drenched aesthetic. That constantly shifting cinematic style is one of the reasons why the *X* series has proved so fascinating. Not only are they movies *about* the movies, but each film's cinematic antecedents are there for fans to pore over.

"Craft is a big part of what binds these movies together," West says. "They're all very different, but they're very purposeful. Aesthetically, they're very specific and, well, you're aware of the filmmaking, I think, while you're watching these movies. That was a big thing for me because I come to movies very visually, and from the craft of filmmaking – I have a real reverence for it. So to me, if the camera direction is good, or the special effects and make-up is good, or the way the music is cut to the scene is good, that's part of the enjoyment of seeing films."

Which is what makes these movies not just a feast for cineastes, but so much fun for West. Each successive film brings with it fresh challenges for the director, as he adapts the story to a new style, from the visuals to the editing to the pacing to the score.

"For these movies that are so cinema-focused, any kind of technique or any kind of style is really on the table," West says about his chameleonic series. "I just wanted to lean into the filmmaking; a lot of movies now shy away from it, and it's a lot of just plot and dialogue. Broadly speaking, photography has gotten a little bit better, certainly on TV, but it's the same rhythm of editing and the same kind of music, so whenever something breaks that mould, it really stands out these days.

"To some degree, that's what I'm hoping to do with these, which is to have them be in their own lane and have people

Maxine (Mia Goth) and Tabby (Halsey).

"Don't worry, I'm sure this'll be completely fine."

remember that you can get a little bit weird and the audiences are smart enough to go with you."

The "smart" thing has, of course, led to West's films being bracketed with other critically love-bombed movies such as *Hereditary* and *Saint Maud* as "elevated horror" (all three X films are distributed by A24, that doyen of arthouse terror). While some directors bristle at the mention of the "h" word, West is entirely comfortable describing his movies as horror, and doesn't think it's a reductive term.

"I would definitely say this movie is horror, but my definition of horror is pretty broad," he says. "But with this movie, if you're expecting something like *X*, something very in your face, a horror beat all the time, it's broader than that. At the same time, though, not everybody makes it to the end of this movie, and they die in pretty gruesome ways!"

As with Ari Aster and Rose Glass's films, West's cine-literate movies have found an audience beyond the horror crowd. While they certainly deliver the chills and frights, there's a thematic richness and a love of technique in these films that have helped them not only cross over to mainstream audiences, but endear them to critics who'd normally be sniffy about a slasher series.

"My movies *are* horror movies, but people who don't like horror tend to like them," the director says. "The big hurdle for me is trying to convince them – 'You say you hate horror movies, but it's not what you think, give it a try.'

"We showed Elizabeth Debicki the movie the other day at 9am, which is a horrible time to watch it, and afterwards she said, 'I hate horror movies and I was stressed out about watching it,' but then she really had a blast with it. Right from the get-go, she was on board."

As much as these movies are about scares and kills, they're also about fame and the hunger for it. In *X*, every one of the cast and crew of *The Farmer's Daughter* (the porn flick within the movie) thinks they're on the precipice of stardom, from its Fellini-aping cinematographer to the film's stetson-rocking director. In *Pearl*, the titular character dreams of the big time, her drab Texas life juiced up by what she sees on the movie screen. *MaXXXine* continues this theme, with Mia Goth's one-time porn star attempting to break into the world of mainstream horror ("Name five celebrities who got their start in horror movies," she asks her friend in the trailer: see boxout below).

"For Maxine, trying to become famous is a major theme for the character through *X* and through *MaXXXine*," West says. "*X* is a movie about how if you want to be part of filmmaking, but you're not on the inside, then this kind of scrappy do-it-yourself low-budget entrepreneurial way of making a porn movie in the same way you would make a horror that could go to a drive-in, that was your way from the outside to get into the industry. If *Pearl* is looking at the glamour of Hollywood in this hopeful way of what your life could be like if you had the kind of life that the people in the movies have, then *MaXXXine* is about once you get to Hollywood, then what happens?

> **"I would definitely say this movie is horror, but my definition of horror is pretty broad"**

"This trilogy," he continues, "yes, they're about fame and yes, they're three different horror movies, and yes, they should be entertaining and scary, but they're also a celebration of movies and different kinds of moviemaking. I mean, I didn't know I was going to make three movies when I made the first one. The goal of *X* was to really put the craft on display. And now hopefully I've done it three times."

Three times, yes, but what about a fourth? Despite West referring to a trilogy, he's also said before that he's "trying to build a world out of all this", suggesting less a triumvirate of films and more a cinematic universe, a sort of MCU with gore. So what's the future of the X series? Will Maxine – or Mia Goth at least – always be at the centre of these stories, or are there plans to spin off any characters?

"I'll be vague about it, but I have an idea that I think would be a cool addition to these three movies," West teases. "But I'm not sure. Having just finished these movies, do I want to wake up on Monday and start doing that, or do I want to give myself a break and do something different and then come back to it? So yes, there is a potential for the X universe, as people call it. But I think that Maxine's story is complete with this."

MaXXXine is in cinemas from 5 July.

BACON BITS

Ti West on how Kevin Bacon ended up in *MaXXXine*

In the film's trailer, Maxine asks her friend "Name five celebrities who got their start in horror movies", to which he replies, "John Travolta, Jamie Lee Curtis, Demi Moore and Brooke Shields." Ti West reveals that there was an additional name in the original version of the script – Kevin Bacon, the breakout star of 1980's *Friday The 13th*.

"But then I cast him, so I thought, I've gotta take that out!" the director laughs. Bacon is one of the many marquee-name actors to sign on for the third film in the X series, and came to the movie as a committed fan of the director.

"I had always heard that Kevin Bacon had liked my films since [2009's] *The House Of The Devil*. I'd never met him – at one point after *X*, I was meant to have a coffee with him, but it never happened, and after that we were never in the same place at the same time.

"Then when I wrote this movie, I had him in the back of my mind: 'Allegedly this guy likes my movies, so maybe he'd like to be in one.' Then we just sent it to him and then we finally had that coffee and he was like, 'Yes! I like your movies! I'd love to be in this!'"

INVESTIGATION
FBI
SPECIAL AGENT

KILLER INSTINCT

LISTEN LOUD THE SERPENTS... HELL AWAITS IN LONGLEGS, THE YEAR'S MOST INTRIGUING NEW HORROR

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

OSGOOD PERKINS HAD A VISITOR in his head. At first it was a nameless, half-glimpsed figure. Black clothes. Straggly hair. A face pale and powdery with make-up. Its intentions? Malevolent, naturally.

"All writers are the same," Perkins tells *SFX*, explaining this presence that lurked rent-free inside him for years. "We all have a bin, a drawer, a pile of things that are free-floating. One thing that kept floating around was this person. My feeling was that he drove up to people's houses, where their children had birthday parties, and he brought something for them, like a little piano or a stuffed animal. He was an entertainer of some kind.

"It's up to us as creative people to grab these things. This guy sort of sniffed around the edges of various projects. It's like having a character in a recurring dream, right? It's like tuning in to a radio. This guy kept coming into my channels."

Finally it named itself. "You have to listen for the thing, and if the thing says 'Longlegs' you say, 'Okay, I agree,' and then you wonder why it's Longlegs. And that becomes the work of the creative process. So he became this guy who did these things. He became someone a cop was chasing."

Written and directed by Perkins, *Longlegs* is set to loose this ghoulish intruder into all of our imaginations. It's a movie that brings an occult shudder to the standard serial killer procedural, as FBI agent Lee Harker (Maika Monroe) takes on the seemingly demonically inclined title character, played by Nicolas Cage.

"When you're writing something like this on spec, you know ultimately it's going to need somebody to pay for it," says Perkins, whose possession tale *The Blackcoat's Daughter* (2015) established him as a compelling new voice in American horror. "Someone's got to think it's worth something in order to give you money to make it.

"So part of where your mind is at is, 'What's universal? What's acceptable, what is expected? What's comfortable for an audience?' and you think about how to make that part work. Then there's the part that's like, 'What's really great? What's really original and weird and dark and scary and true to *me*?' and the whole time you're working the ends in on each other, so you can get it to the audience in a way that they can vibrate with.

"So with this movie, the set-up is sort of *Silence Of The Lambs*-y. You've got a young female cop. There's a killer – probably. She's chasing things. I was able to say, 'Oh, it's like *Silence Of The Lambs*' with the left hand and →

Blair Underwood as Agent Carter: bless you.

Nicolas Cage as Longlegs. You'll have to trust us...

Director Osgood Perkins on set.

then the right hand was doing its own dream thing. But if you don't do the *Silence Of The Lambs* part the dream thing becomes bullshit. It's not even bullshit. It's masturbation. It's just for you.

"So it's *Silence Of The Lambs* but it's also kind of *Zodiac*, it's sort of *Seven*. There's kind of a pattern, a cipher, the sort of things you recognise. I'll say the word Manson early on in the movie, do you know what I mean? You make it fair. But then you do your truth on the other side."

Longlegs arrives guarding its secrets. A cryptic promo campaign has left the internet poring over trailers for clues to dissect and decode. Subliminal flashes of slaughtered animals mix with glimpses of runes and sigils. A goat-horned silhouette hovers blackly behind a little girl. Sobs, whimpers and sighs accompany enigmatic references to "The man downstairs" and faux-Biblical exhortations to "See the darkness slithering." Quotes from old

"I think everybody believes that there's more than what we think there is"

T-Rex songs – "You've got the teeth of the hydra upon you" – only add to the unsettling mystique of it all.

It's a marketing strategy so wilfully enigmatic that it's even withheld the face of the film's star. Cage, for his part, has teased that he's playing "a possessed Geppetto", hinting at a Satanic riff on the dollmaker in *Pinocchio*. You suspect it's slightly more than Perkins would have wanted out there, but is Cage's take a fair description?

"It's not unfair," he smiles. "What I will say about myself is that I'm a sucker for the classics. Nothing for me is better than an old Disney cartoon. If there's something better than *Pinocchio*, as a movie, I'm afraid to say I don't know what it is."

Just what kind of energy are you tapping into, directing such an electrifying, idiosyncratic performer as Cage? "It's like – and obviously I mean this in the best possible way – the lion tamer goes into the cage. In cartoons he has a stool and a whip, but the stool and the whip don't really do much. Obviously I don't use a whip, even metaphorically, but the animal is your movie star. At this point in Nicolas Cage's existence he's not there for me to tell him what to do. We can talk about it. We had lots of conversations, lots of phone calls, lots of FaceTimes.

"We derived the voice of the character, the look of the character, the attitude. What references is Nic going to use in terms of people in his life or other actors? He's very upfront that he pulls from other people a lot. So which other person is he going to do?

"By the time he gets to the set he's unrecognisable. He doesn't sound like himself, he doesn't walk like himself. So you have this element, like wind or fire, but it's Nicolas Cage as your character."

Perkins is also quick to praise Monroe, who earned modern horror icon status for her turn in 2014's *It Follows*. "One of the great things about making a movie is when a person goes in front of a lens and completely changes. It's like they've been replaced. Bodysnatchers!

"With Maika she just passed in front of the lens and became this other thing, which I thought was so brilliant. The way she plays it is so awkwardly, wonderfully weird. It's really a beautiful performance."

STOCK ELEMENTS: DUNCAN1890, RGAP/GETTY

Lee (Maika Monroe) does the classic wall thing.

"Those legs... they're long! Just TOO long!"

In the long, real-world shadow of Ed Gein and the Son of Sam, serial killers endure as a terrifying but grounded threat. Do we turn to the supernatural to try and make sense of such true-life horror?

"I think that it's real," Perkins tells *SFX*. "I really think that there's other shit going on. To say the supernatural is real is sort of obvious. That which we can't explain, understand or see is obviously just as real. I mean, love is supernatural, in a way, right? I think everybody believes that there's more than what we think there is. Some of us are cool with that and some of us aren't cool with that.

"People go to horror movies relentlessly. Relentlessly! They never stop! The one thing you can count on is people are going to see supernatural demonstrations. I think it makes people feel connected, like, 'Okay, cool, there's something else going on and when I die it's probably not just over.'"

For Perkins the genre is literally in his blood – and just to be clear, that's "Blood, mother, *blood*!" His father Anthony played cinema's definitive serial killer Norman Bates in *Psycho* (1960). As a kid he briefly took on the role himself, appearing in flashback in *Psycho II* (1983). Does he feel a natural affinity for such dark storytelling?

"I feel like it's a forked thing for me," he shares. "Obviously my dad was known for one of the greatest things in movies. Everything within *Psycho* – what it is, what it meant – is all seminal. It couldn't be more important, or better. It's so fucking excellent, right? No two ways about it.

"Then as I was growing up, and starting to get into making movies with my friends at the weekends, my dad was paying the bills by doing bad horror movies in Europe. That was our reality. So I lived in this place of, 'Yeah, horror, absolutely – but it sort of sucks. So isn't there a way to [make it good]...?'

"It's funny. Right when I made *The Blackcoat's Daughter* people started talking about elevated horror movies. It was like I was in the freshman class! *The Witch* is an elevated horror movie and then the studio executives all start saying 'elevated horror movie'.

"But I think all we mean by that is horror movies are kinda great. Shouldn't we make them special and more than typical?

"It's always disappointing when a studio brings out a shitty movie that gets like 23% on Rotten Tomatoes. But people still go. I feel like that's too bad on the audience, because horror is so cool."

Perkins catches himself. "Forget about cool. There's so much *depth* to it!"

Longlegs is in US cinemas from 12 July. A UK release is TBC.

MONKEY MAGIC

Coming at the King

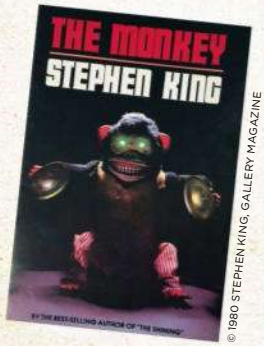
"The good news is that Stephen King likes it!" says Osgood Perkins of his next film, an adaptation of the horror master's "The Monkey", which tells of a cursed toy exhumed from an attic.

"It's not a novel. It's not a thousand pages. It's like 20 pages or something, and I really didn't use very much of it. But I wanted to say, 'This is a Stephen King movie.' Not, 'This is a movie' but 'This is a Stephen King movie.' I want it to say Stephen King in the title.

"Because I know what *Misery* felt like when I read it when I was 14 or whatever. I know how scary the *Pet Sematary* cover looked when I was a kid. I know how *The Shining* felt when I first saw it. So going into the project I very much wanted to foreground the Stephen King-ness of it.

"He's arguably the most important contributor to the genre ever. If you had one human name to assign to horror, wouldn't it be Stephen King? If you sent it to Mars and you could put one name? He's such a vital artist. He's a huge writer of American stuff. He's like John Steinbeck, practically. So it's really wanting to honour that and write something that he would like. And he likes it."

Not that we should expect some po-faced salute. "There's reverence, there's irreverence," Perkins reveals to *SFX*. "It's very funny. It's more of a comedy than anything, to be honest..."

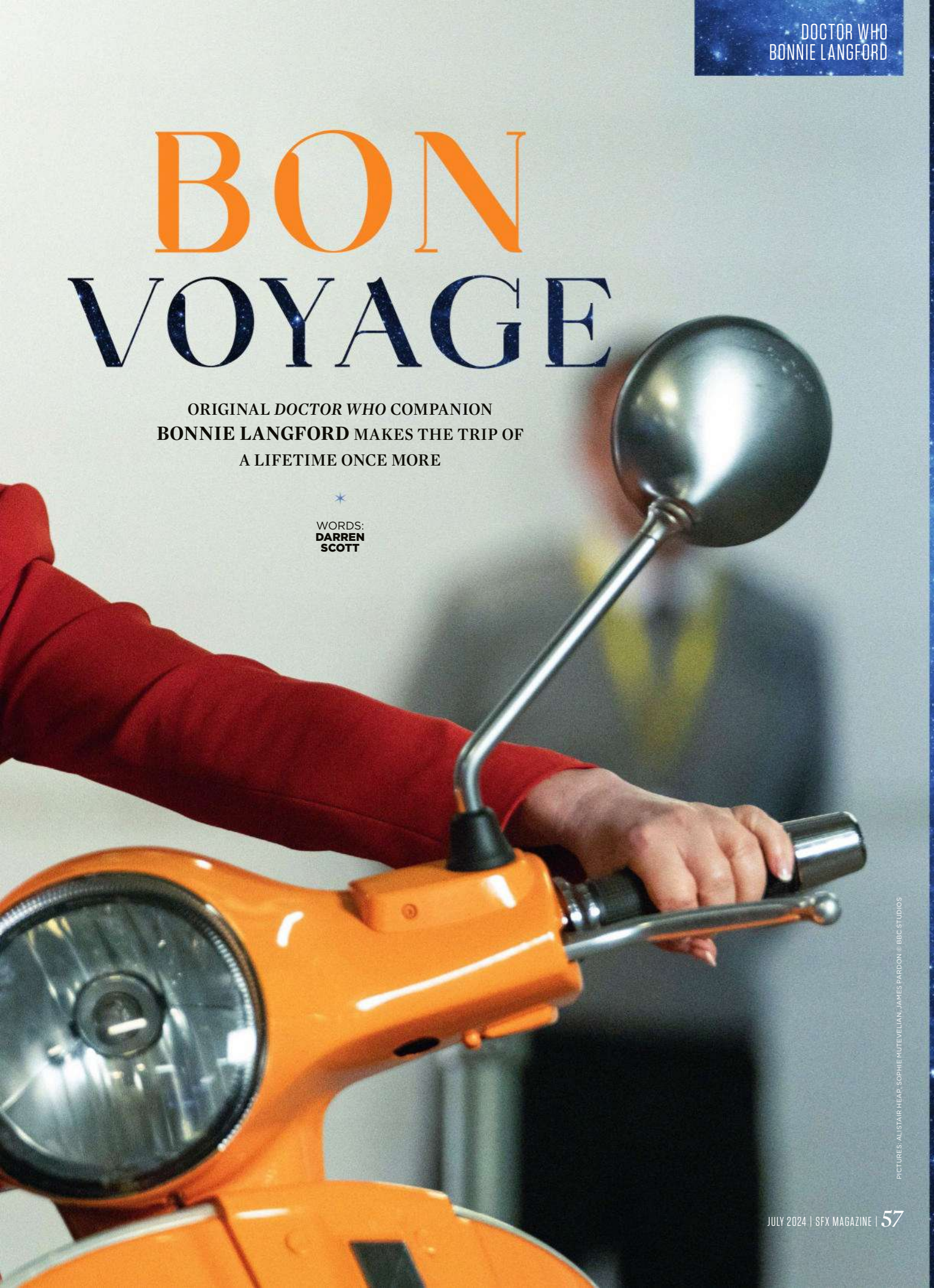


© 1980 STEPHEN KING, GALLERY MAGAZINE

BON VOYAGE

ORIGINAL *DOCTOR WHO* COMPANION **BONNIE LANGFORD** MAKES THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME ONCE MORE

WORDS:
DARREN SCOTT



PICTURES: ALISTAIR HEAP, SOPHIE MUTEVELIAN, JAMES PARDON © BBC STUDIOS

"Ssh... here's the Wordle answer for today."

TIMEY-WIMEY. ANY *DOCTOR WHO* interview is going to be caught in the vortex somewhat.

It's July 2023 and *SFX* is on a *vast* soundstage at Wolf Studios in Cardiff, where filming of the season one finale is underway. "Is this not shattering all your illusions?" Bonnie Langford asks, reclining in a chair with a jacket over her. We're having the time of our lives, we tell the national treasure sat before us. "No, it's great isn't it?" she beams.

At this point it hasn't even been announced that Langford will be appearing in the 60th anniversary special "The Giggle" before returning for season one, but people do love it when a classic companion returns, we offer.

"I'm glad you said that and not vintage," she chuckles. "A very good vintage, though..."

Mel, companion to the Sixth and Seventh Doctors, has never really left Langford as she's appeared in various audio, DVD and Blu-ray releases, and regularly attends conventions since departing the series in 1987.

This return is set to right a lot of wrongs for the character – "She only ever said, 'But Doctor!' and ran down the wrong corridor," Langford jokes. In linear terms, it's only been a few months since she made a brief cameo at the end of Jodie Whittaker's swansong, "The Power Of The Doctor".

"It means so much to so many different people," she reflects. "The fact that when I did 'The Power Of The Doctor', people were so moved by it. Tiny little scene, just a few of us sat around on chairs – which I thought was a lovely idea, that there's a support group for these people who've been through how this happened. Has it not happened? Does anybody else go through it? I'm sure they do. But where have they all gone? Or do we forget everything? I thought it was just a lovely concept. So I suppose I'm taking it one step further..."

Sadly we can't tell you anything about the scenes we've watched her film, or what's happening in the two-part season finale just yet. But Langford herself has a date with a pyrotechnic, so we'll jump right in...

Did you expect to return again so soon?

◆ No, not really. But it's fantastic. I did Big Finish audios – over the pandemic Russell found one that he'd written when he was about 23 on his electric typewriter, ("Mind Of The Hodiac"), so we recorded that, which was brilliant, and then I get this phone call to say, "How do you feel about her coming back?" and I jumped at it, because it's just brilliant.

It's the strangest job ever, really – you never expect to do a job and it keep coming back to you. And it *keeps* coming back and coming back and coming back. It's just a gift that keeps on giving. It's extraordinary.

If someone had said to me, what is it, 40 years ago, you'll be doing this – I would have just laughed. I would have said no way, no way, not at all. But this is what is so unique about *Doctor Who*, that it was one of the first →

Mel (Bonnie Langford) makes her return.

trailblazing shows that has stood the test of absolute every single time generation there is. It has something beautiful about it.

With Russell taking it where he did in the noughties, and now, it has given it this wonderful freshness. The quality of the writing and all the production is of such a standard now that we didn't have... When I did it, it was definitely very "cardboard cutout". So once you've got all those other elements that come together, all you need to keep are the hearts. And you've got that. You've got someone like Russell who is just a huge fan of it as well, so can understand all that.

The difference about it is it's not just an adventure show, it's not just somebody travelling through time, it's the fact that there's different moments that have this wonderful love and nostalgia. Everyone, even if they've never watched the programme, has some perception of it, in this country particularly.

It instantly puts them back, like a scrapbook, to wherever they were in their life and who they watched it with, and then different generations that watched it, and that's really what it's about as well. It's not just about the programme. It's about what it means to people and that's very special. That doesn't come along very often.

Where do we find Mel now? Does she finally get her surname?

◆ She's older. She has got a surname! She's Bush. Melanie Bush.

That was never said in the original series...

◆ Wasn't it? No! You know, it's after Shepherd's Bush. I thought Sylvester called her that. Never mind, you know much more than I do. She never had an introductory story. So when I went into the show, I didn't really know that much about it. It was a nice little summer job.

I went into it when it was very turbulent and I wasn't given any of this backstory, except that she came from Pease Pottage and was a computer programmer. She never went near anything technical, and she never did anything that really resembled anything. So it was quite tricky. To be honest, it was just not very challenging. I felt like I was a bit sort of like Fay Wray.

To come back to it like this is just an absolute... well, it's another gift. It's lovely to be able to feel that she has achieved something on her own, that she's now part of something else and that she has a lot to contribute. She's been travelling space with Sabalom Glitz and various other things.

There's also this vulnerability, there's this sadness about her as well. One thing I never really liked was the fact that she was making the Doctor go on a fitness regime, and I can't think of anything more annoying. That's what she had to do. Now there's none of that.

Meeting Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) for the first time.

Well, Ncuti doesn't need it...

◆ I know. Exactly. Quite obviously. He was leaping down the stairs the other day, and I'm running after him thinking, "Oh, me knees," but didn't say anything of course. She doesn't have to wear quite such high heels, because I had to wear such high heels with Colin because I couldn't fit in a two-shot.

What has kept it alive for me as well is these audio dramas that I've done. So a lot of that has actually been very helpful because to me, as an actor, those sorts of things have been embraced. So I'm coming into it not thinking, "Good grief, I haven't played this for a long time, I wonder what she is." There's sort of an element of that

Mel *finally* gets to do stuff with computers.

Ncuti Gatwa makes his entrance in "The Giggle".

> **"This set, this is bigger than TV Centre itself, the whole thing, when we did it"**

continuation, and growth. So to come back here is a bit like coming home.

What we're doing today, that set is just fantastic, isn't it? Isn't it fantastic with all those SPOILER SPOILER? And to walk in and see SPOILER SPOILER was really quite moving.

Does Mel finally get to do anything with computers?

◆ Yes, she absolutely does. She's very involved. When you think about it, when I started, we didn't have mobile phones. Now we have mobile phones attached to our hands at all times. That concept just was not there. Computers were still quite chunky big boxes. There wasn't room for that on the TARDIS console. Mel didn't go anywhere near anything. So yes, that has been addressed. I'm very pleased to say it has. Not in a big deal, but she goes and [motions typing]. I myself cannot work a keyboard properly. I am not very tech-savvy. I go to Ncuti or Millie and go, "How do I do that?" But yeah, she is definitely up to speed now completely, which is great.

How does Mel react to this new Doctor?

◆ I think Mel is absolutely thrilled because there's this continuation, but with a fresh approach, with a new life. It means that the Doctor goes on, that there's more adventures, different viewpoints, seeing the world in a fresh light, and Melanie wants it, she now wants to go on forever. So to think that there's somebody else who's got that same intensity and that same intelligence, but also from a completely different angle, is exciting. She loves it. She adores it.

What was it like for you seeing the new TARDIS set?

◆ Well, it's bigger. It's a bit more expensive, and it's grander. But there's still something exciting about it. More exciting, actually much more because it's on such a grand scale. What's important about the show is that it has this history that gives it something different to any old adventure sort of story, and that's incorporated.

Yes, it's on a grand scale, yes, we've moved on, yes, the world has changed, the world is a very different place, the universe is a different place to what it was and it's kind of grown up a bit. Also just walking on here... and look, this set, this is bigger than TV Centre itself, the whole thing, when we did it. [Laughs]

We were filmed in a corner, literally. So the opportunities are much greater. What I love about it is the fact that sometimes when things get bigger, they lose the essence of them. This I don't think has at all, it's just moved with the times.

When I was [originally] in the TARDIS, we had paper plates on the wall and a hat stand. I mean, that was it really, wasn't it? It was very basic. Now there's so many other colours and so much more texture. It's exciting.

It's exciting as an actor as well, to be able to think, "Oh, I can find that within these little words." I know that Russell's put things in that maybe only I know about and I'll go, "Oh, that was a reference." How gorgeous that you've got a character that's got a lot of experience. →

“There’s quite a lot of very strong women in this show”

When I go back on the set, I suddenly go, “I remember that.” Like people do when they watch the show, I went back to me being 22 and standing in that TARDIS and going, “Gosh, I was in a different place there in my head.” And it’s *lovely* to have. For me with this part, it’s great to, I hope, put a few things right, that I have seen and thought, “Why was I doing that?” I, hopefully, can make Mel a little bit more grounded, a bit more real and a little less eager.

We know you get to ride a scooter in the finale...

◆ I do! I get to ride a Vespa, how camp is that? And it’s orange? Of course. You see, that’s it. There’s a lot of orange going on. I realised that Mel, part one, she bought quite a lot of orange on and off. Thank god I don’t have to drink carrot juice in this. So pleased. God! [Laughs] No fitness, no carrot juice, result.

There is that element of character about it – of course Mel rides round London on a Vespa. Of course she does. What else would she do? Buzzing in and out, trying to get to the action, making sure everything’s right. She’s quite a fixer. She wants to fix everything. So of course she’d be on a little Vespa dodging in and out of the world. Making it work.

Do you hope there might be scope for Mel to appear again?

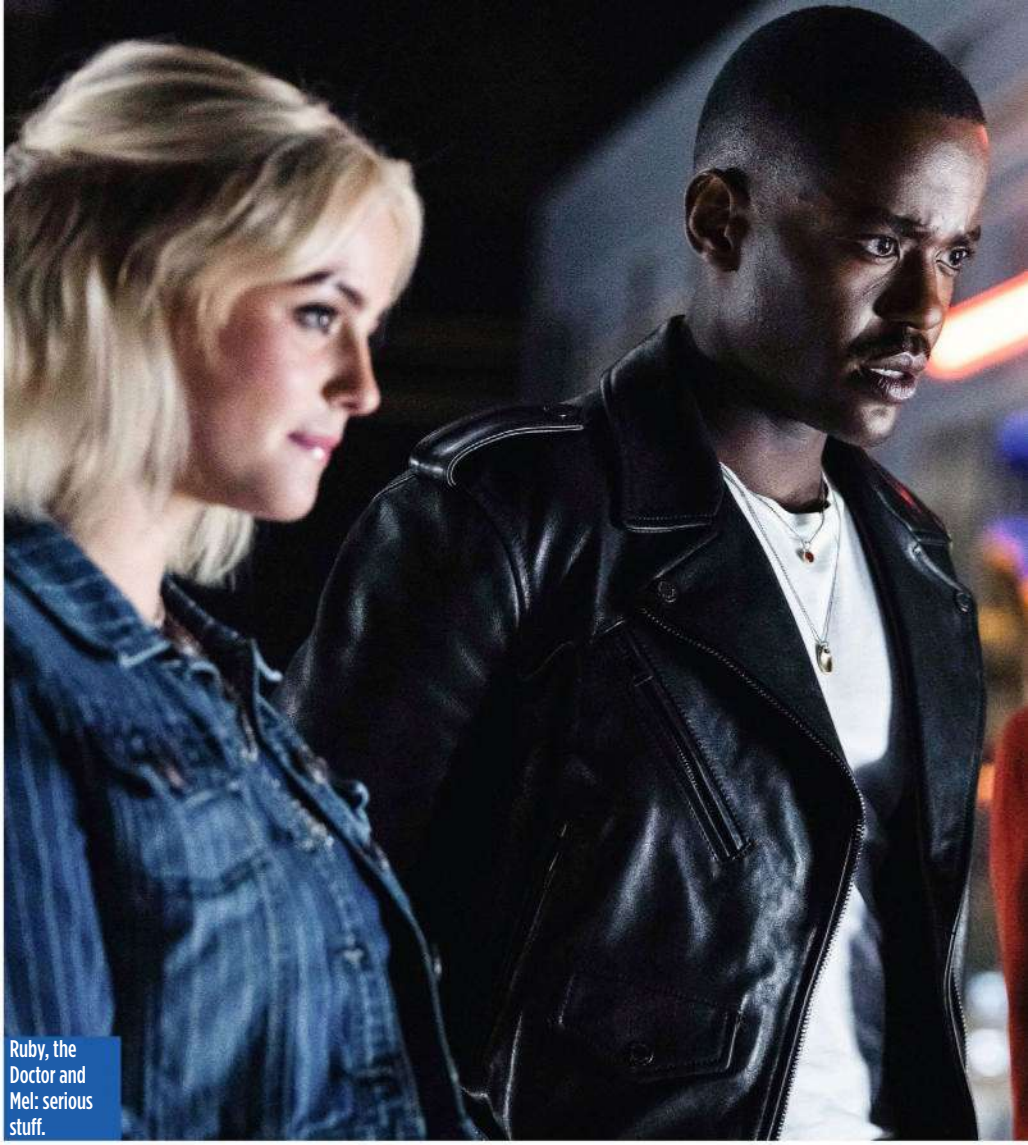
◆ Well, that you’d have to speak to the boss himself about. Oh, I’d love her to be back. Because I think also, it’s quite important. It’s quite important that you have different ages. There’s quite a lot of very strong women in this show and I think that’s really important.

I think it’s really to be celebrated that there’s a lot of strong older women in this show. That means a lot. It’s important that we have those figures because they are important in our lives. Also people who are not older and sitting in a bath chair. That’s important, too. Vibrant, worthy, visible.

These women are celebrated and powerful.

◆ And vulnerable. And that’s okay, too. And that they are relevant. They’re not just sitting in the back of a car being driven. And also, I think, they’re real. That’s important – we have real people so that we have that whole rainbow of colours for everyone, and that we have those different shades.

So that, as I say, Mel runs behind, running down the stairs, but might turn around and go, “Ooh my knees”. That we have those moments where we go, “Yeah, I can’t quite keep up, but I’m there.” And that’s okay. It’s okay, as well to be vulnerable. It’s okay to turn around and go, “I don’t know how to do this, but let’s try and we’ll give it a go.” Then looking back and thinking, “Well, things were different then.”



Ruby, the Doctor and Mel: serious stuff.

I love that bit where I just walked in and saw SPOILER. I love that because it’s, “Oh, but it’s the same, but it’s different and life is a continuation.” There are great lessons to be told – not in a preachy way, but to help people deal with different things in their life, with good and evil, with bereavement, with failure, with success, and that it’s just okay.

We just deal with things, and we might not get it right every time. But we’re just trying, and that also the choices you make have consequences, and they’re not always going to be great. But we can hang on in there. Yes, that there is a continuation, that also there might be a betrayal. But that’s because people have to do things for various reasons.

[Special effects come over: “We just want to show her a quick pyro test and then we can bring her back.”]

They’re going to blow you up, Bonnie.

◆ I’m *there*.

Is it nice for it to be a much bigger experience than perhaps you thought?

◆ Oh, absolutely. I mean, I was always one of those people that turned around and said we were not keeping up in those days, in the old days. You turned *Top Of The Pops* on, someone had a pop video that had far more visual effects than we could ever have, because of budgets and timing, you shove in a bit of Quantel [1980s TV graphics/effects system]. What we were able to do then people can now do on their phones. That was a big deal.

But it was so small compared to what is possible now. It’s unbelievable what they can do now. Absolutely unbelievable. So there was no way in those days we were able to do anything but sort of ask people to suspend disbelief and look to their imagination. I think that’s why those audios have worked so well, because you don’t have the effects, because you don’t have to see it might be a bit wobbly. It was a little bit *Acorn Antiques* at times, we all know that.

But there was a beautiful charm about it. That was what was so amazing, that even with that lack of budget, and goodness knows what else, it still had something about it that people wanted to watch. Now it’s got the budget, the production values, the writing, the creativity. This is why I think it’s so great to be part of and I’m so thrilled to be part of it again, because it has retained the heart in spite of that.

As I said before, sometimes when things get bigger, they lose the essence of what they’re there for. This now, I think, has it completely,

With Kate Lethbridge-Stewart (Jemma Redgrave).

the balance has been set better. The thing I always was so surprised about with *Doctor Who* was the number of stars, people, wonderful actors who wanted to be in it. I used to think, "How do you get these people to be in this show?" but it was almost like a little mini rep company with Sylvester and me.

We would think, "Who's going to be in it this time?" and these amazing actors would walk through the door and say, "Of course I want to be in *Doctor Who*!" and you'd think, "Really?" That's still there, but now the production can support that standard. It matches the standard and yet it's still got the heart and the love. That's what's really, really important. It's quintessentially British. I hope that when it goes – I mean, it is international, but when it goes even *more* international, that people will embrace that, they'll understand and they'll love the fact that ultimately, yes, okay, it's about the universe and god knows what else but it's made in the UK, and it has that about it. That's what makes it different to any other kind of fantasy series.

Dealing with the Toymaker in "The Giggle".

Do you have a WhatsApp group for companions?

◆ No! No, we don't actually. [Laughs] I'm not sure I can cope. But no. Sophie [Aldred, who plays Ace] and I, we talk a lot. She started when she took over from me and we've always stayed in touch and that's lovely.

What do you think '80s producer John Nathan-Turner would think of this?

◆ He would be *kicking* everyone with jealousy. He would want to be here. But thrilled, I think. I think he would be *so, so* happy, but jealous at the same time. Jealous as hell. He'd want to be here. Think of all those photos you'd have with all the lah-di-dah stars. He'd be there.

His wall was full of him with the people that were in the show. He *loved* this show. It was down to him that it kept going, so much of it, it really was. Maybe sometimes he got in the way, who knows. But he loved this show, and he would be so happy... and jealous.

Is it interesting to look at Ncuti and Millie at the start of that journey you had at 22?

◆ Yeah, they've got no idea. No idea. And nor did I. At times I was thinking, "What is this?" As I say, I would never have said I would still be involved with this show. I just did it. It was a job, I finished it, thank you very much, moved on to new things, went back to other stuff, and then it kept coming back.

Then you start to go, "Do you know what, this is amazing. This is really amazing." Somebody said to me, "Well, it's just a job for you. It was a television show, you ran down that corridor because the director told you to, but for *us*, it is a community."

This guy said to me, "I've travelled the world, I've met my wife, I've got two kids with this person and I have this wonderful interest that takes me places I never thought I would go." We all have different interests and just because it's a TV show, it's this wonderful community and I embrace that now.

What was it like for you when your return was announced?

◆ Well, I was working, I was here, so it was lovely actually. I did see some of it later. I was like, "Wow." It was gorgeous. I'm sure there are people who aren't happy, but how *lovely*. How lucky am I?

People love Mel.

◆ I love that. Her heart's in the right place. Her heart is really in the right place. [Someone shouts her name in the distance]

Oh god, here we go. Do you want to blow me up, Ben? They do everything to me...

Doctor Who is on BBC One, iPlayer and Disney+ globally.

There was no clear winner in the squinting competition.

TINSELTOWN TARDIS

AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE DISNEY+ LAUNCH OF DOCTOR WHO IN HOLLYWOOD

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

IS THAT A TARDIS ON SUNSET Boulevard? The quintessentially British time machine made its way to the heart of Hollywood, California on 8 May for the US Disney+ premiere of *Doctor Who*. *SFX* was present as they rolled out an impressive blue carpet launch for the series, welcoming Ncuti Gatwa, Millie Gibson and showrunner Russell T Davies.

Gatwa and Gibson looked stunning as they represented cast and crew back in Britain. With the premiere officially introducing American audiences to his Doctor, Gatwa described his take on the time traveller as "flirty, emotionally vulnerable and fun." He also threw finale speculation into high gear when he teased that it's "devastating"...

Gibson said the premiere of season one has been a long time coming, and teased, "I'm excited for everybody to see Ruby Sunday in different forms and different episodes."

Last but not least, Davies said that getting to cast a new Doctor and companion for this era of the show was a thrill. "Everyone wanted the part. Every actor in Britain wants to be in *Doctor Who* and those two got it because they're absolutely the best. Genuinely the best."

He was excited for any American newcomers coming fresh to the *Who* mythology with this season on Disney+. He said, "It's like jumping into the biggest toy box, or discovering a huge fantasy factory. If you want to devolve into the history, you could be there for days and days with a huge exploration. Or just stay in the present with eight episodes to come, a new Christmas special to come and a second season already commissioned. I've loved this all my life and it's been one of the great comforts and joys of my life."

Celebs who also showed up for the rare *Doctor Who* US celebration included actress and podcaster Felicia Day (*Supernatural*), Alex Borstein (*Family Guy*), Rick and Becky Riordan (*Percy Jackson And The Olympians*), Dua Saleh (*Sex Education*) and many more.

The screening was hosted at the NeueHouse Hollywood, with guests ushered into a blue-lit speakeasy where everyone could pick up a TARDIS popcorn box. There was also a mini costume exhibit featuring some of the hottest outfits used to dress the Doctor and Ruby this season.

The most eye-catching were costumes from the episode "The Devil's Chord", including the duo's retro '60s garb, and Maestro's piano-key-inspired suit, worn on-screen by Jinkx Monsoon.

Once seated, President of Disney Branded Television Ayo Davis opened the event with a shout out to all the *Who* creatives in the audience, which included series executive producers Jane Tranter, Julie Gardner, Phil Collinson and Joel Collins. In particular, Davis praised Davies, Gibson and the first Doctor under Disney, Gatwa. She said to the actor, "The incredible energy and broad range of emotions that you so eloquently pour into your performance brings spark, dimension and depth to this character. We know that your Doctor will be in the hearts and minds of generations to come."

Following the screening, Gatwa took some sharp photos beside his costumes. Everyone in the audience migrated up to the roof of the NeueHouse, which had been transformed into a wonderland of *Who*-themed speciality cocktails, small bites, and even a TARDIS photo station where guests could pretend that they were taking the Police Box for a spin through space and time.

With a TARDIS and the official *Who* logo projected onto an entire wall, a DJ played classic tunes from British rockers throughout the evening. Gatwa and Gibson held court fielding compliments from the crowd, taking time to speak with all of their new fans. As the stars glittered above, it was a momentous celebration of a new era for the show.

New Doctor Who episodes are on Fridays throughout June on Disney+, and Saturdays on BBC One and iPlayer in the UK.

PICTURES: DISNEY/PICTUREGROUP

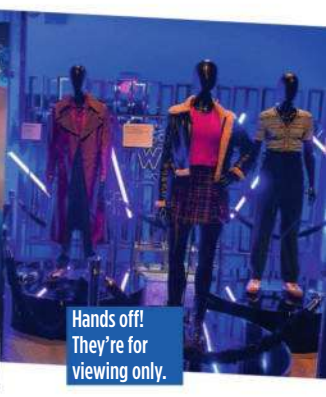
RTD and the stars mingle with Disney TV bigwigs.

Felicia Day was a guest...

... as was Alex Borstein.

Rick and Becky Riordan.

Dua Saleh (*Sex Education*).


Hands off! They're for viewing only.

TIME TRIALS

AS *The Butterfly Effect* TURNS 20, DIRECTORS ERIC BRESS AND JONATHAN MACKYE GRUBER TAKE US INSIDE THE DARKEST TIME TRAVEL MOVIE EVER MADE

WORDS: **SIMON BLAND**

FORGET SPORTS ALMANACS AND ALMOST KISSING your mum – Marty McFly's dealings with the Doc in *Back To The Future* feel tame compared to *The Butterfly Effect*. It's perhaps the darkest time-travel movie ever committed to celluloid, with an alternate ending so harrowing that it still keeps people up at night despite 20 years having passed since it first hit cinemas.

Released in 2004, this sci-fi drama had then-rising star Ashton Kutcher playing Evan, a young man with a very troubled past that saw him and his pals enduring a torrent of abuse. From parental violence and encounters with a paedophilic neighbour, to accidentally causing the death of a mother and her baby and witnessing the torture of the family dog, it was a grim period that all involved would rather forget.

It's convenient, then, that when Evan reads from his old journals he discovers that he can travel back in time, inhabit the body of his younger self during blackout periods and change the way history happened. However, what starts as an inexplicable way of fixing everyone's problems quickly descends into a recipe for disaster, as each trip to tweak the past provides an increasingly darker present, with terrible consequences for everyone involved. →

IMAGE ELEMENTS: POBYTOV, YAGI STUDIO, ALENGO, OXYGEN, PASEVEN, MIKROMAN6 © GETTY

Evan (Ashton Kutcher) with Mr Miller (Eric Stoltz).

"It was a philosophical journey," explains Jonathan Mackye Gruber, one half of the film's writing and directing team. He and fellow writer/director Eric Bress wrote *The Butterfly Effect* early on in their collaborative career, but it wasn't until they found wider success by penning 2003's *Final Destination 2* that the opportunity to make it finally arrived.

"Everybody would like to play God, but should they?" ponders Gruber. "Ultimately, we're the sum of our life experiences. There's lots of things I'd love to change in my life, but the really great things maybe wouldn't have happened if I did."

This ethos certainly rang true for Bress, who had a personal connection to *The Butterfly Effect* that directly impacted its creation. "At around 16 years old, something really traumatic happened to me," he tells *SFX*. "I spent the next five years or so thinking, 'Oh my god, what if I could go back and not allow that thing to happen or just bypass that situation entirely?'

"That germ of an idea stuck with me, and the more distance I got between me and the event the more thought-provoking it became. Perhaps I never would've met Jonathan had that one event not happened," says Bress. "It made me think, 'It'd be great if that one thing didn't happen, but I'd sacrifice so many of the good things that I have going for me right now."

Dude, Where's My Scars?

How Ashton Kutcher went from stoner zero to tortured sci-fi hero

Back in 2004, teen idol Ashton Kutcher was far from writer/directors Eric Bress and Jonathan Mackye Gruber's first choice to star in *The Butterfly Effect*. Fresh from *That '70s Show*, Kutcher was more synonymous with goofy comedy than cerebral sci-fi drama. However, when the pair heard he was interested in their script, they decided to pay him a visit and found him jetlagged and in a different mindset.

"Thank God we caught him when he looked like he was having a non-alcohol-induced hangover, because he was so dead serious and intense," remembers Bress. "There was no trace of the comedian at all." Gruber adds: "He'd pasted the entire script on his office wall and made all these notes. I walked out of his house, turned to Eric and said, 'He's the guy.'"

> **When Evan wakes up without arms, we thought the audience was going to laugh**

With their old script back in the spotlight, the duo gave it a polish before production began. While many elements were refined, a few crucial aspects remained the same.

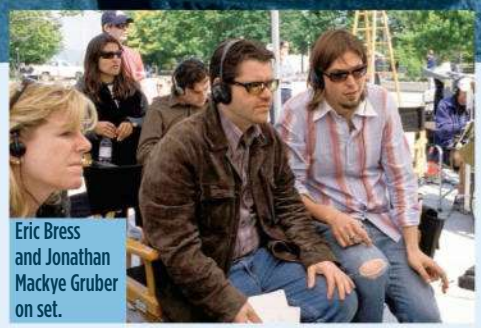
"We knew we didn't want to deal with DeLoreans, serums, radioactive spider bites or anything that'd bear explanation, because we figured an explanation would be laughable no matter what you said," says Bress regarding Evan's unique form of time travel. "Our best bet was to just show it and then not have our characters dive down into the weeds; the more you explain, the more trouble you get into."

Gruber had similar thoughts: "The condition we created was that Evan inherited this power from his father. It's still a big open mystery but we don't have to touch that mythology – we just know that's how it works."

The sinister tone stuck around too, with story beats that were once deemed too distressing for the film to get made now set to be brought to vivid life on screen. On this front, the duo certainly didn't hold back.

Throughout *The Butterfly Effect*'s 113 minutes, we see plenty of troubling scenarios, but two stick out as being particularly distressing: the torture by burning of a dog, and the accidental death of a mother and her baby following an accident involving dynamite. It's a rough watch, even by 2024's standards – but the pair had reasons behind their ruthlessness.

"We tried to go after real-life, powerful situations that might be dark but also relatable and something you'd really want to actually change," explains Gruber. "When you're younger, you push things a little harder. We naturally had a little punk rock spirit in us and we knew we wanted to make these dilemmas really captivating, relatable and things that we can actually see Evan change – no subtle changes."

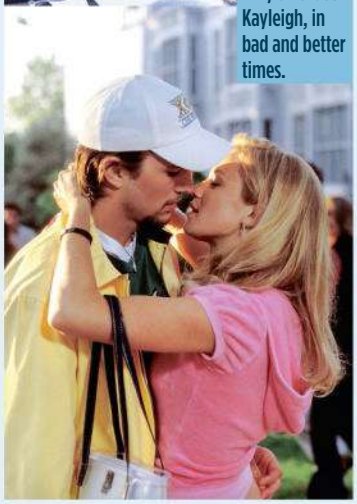


Eric Bress and Jonathan Mackye Gruber on set.

There's certainly nothing subtle about Evan's time-travelling. On one trip, he saves the mother and her daughter from perishing in the explosion, only to wake up in the present to find himself as the victim, having lost both of his arms in the blast. "The darker it was, the funnier it was to us," says Bress, explaining that

A young Evan and his doomed friends.

EVERETT COLLECTION INC. COLLECTION CHRISTOPHEL. MOVIESTORE COLLECTION LTD. TCD/PROD.DB. CINEMATIC/ALAMY



Amy Smart as Kayleigh, in bad and better times.

the duo believed audiences would find the film's extreme tone quite humorous. "I don't think we fully realised that even a rowdy audience would slowly but surely come to be so engrossed in the story that they'd take things more seriously than we expected. When Evan wakes up without arms, we thought the audience was going to laugh. We were playing it for laughs – and even Ashton was playing it for laughs."

The storyline involving Evan's dog being killed had a similarly sobering reception, and almost derailed the entire movie. "At the time, the CEO of New Line Cinema was a major dog-lover and we were worried that when he saw this scene, he was going to tank the film," recalls Gruber.

This resulted in panicked producers. "It became a game of back and forth," continues Gruber. "Maybe we won't burn the dog, maybe we put it in a bag and drop it over a bridge? Then we discovered the CEO's dog recently jumped off his boat and drowned, so we can't drown the dog, that's even worse."

Ultimately, the duo stuck to their original idea, but that first test screening still brings back nail-biting memories for Gruber. "I see the dog scene coming up and I'm shitting myself. How is this going to go over?" The scene came and went, and when the results of the test screening came back they were overwhelmingly positive; it looked like the pair were out of the woods. "The CEO had no issue with it. He told us we dealt with it the right way," recalls Gruber. "It wasn't even a blip on his radar, he was just happy the scores came back high."

Still, knowing where to draw the line was tricky. "At the time, we'd tell ourselves we got it at just the right level, but in hindsight there are definitely times where I think we went too far," admits Bress.

"There were a couple of shots that I'm glad we didn't include. They were really sick," echoes Gruber, detailing a cut scene that followed the explosive death of the mother and her child. "We had a shot of a dummy on fire on the street. It was good that that was never used."

BABY MINE

Gruber and Bress's tonal tightrope walk lasted right until the film's final moments. In their original script, Evan comes to the stark realisation that no amount of time-travelling can help his friends, and that perhaps the best thing he could do for them is to ensure he was never born. In his desperate final moments, he travels back to embody himself in-utero, and uses his umbilical cord to strangle himself in the womb.

"That was the original ending and the script Ashton read," says Gruber. "It really blew people's minds because it was the ultimate sacrifice you could make for the people you love. We thought audiences were going to leave and go, 'Oh my god. What happened?"

Sadly, that didn't end up happening. "Right in the middle of production, New Line Cinema said they had concerns about the darkness of the ending and even though they'd more than likely stick with it, they thought we should have a backup in case it went down poorly with viewers."

As a result, a new ending was shot, one that instead saw Evan travel back to his childhood self and cut all ties with his friends, allowing them to grow up as strangers and avoid any heartache. New Line then offered Bress and Gruber a compromise: test both screenings and go with the one that worked best.

However, when they screened the happy ending and it scored well, the studio decided to not even bother testing the duo's dark original climax. "It was a real bitter pill to swallow," says Gruber, "but at that time there was a DVD market and in certain European countries, they released the movie with the baby ending."

Twenty years later, *The Butterfly Effect*'s message of owning your past – for better or for worse – has impacted viewers in unlikely ways. "It's affected a lot of people's lives," says Gruber, telling us about one encounter he had with a teary viewer after an early Sundance screening. "She explained how it made her feel that she had a voice for the first time. It was a big release and she was crying on my shoulder, thanking me. If ever there's a moment where you feel like you didn't fuck up; that you'd done something that emotionally connected with a person on a deep level, that was it."

The Butterfly Effect is on Prime Video.

Evan is menaced by Lenny (Elden Henson).

Ethan Suplee plays Evan's college pal, Thumper.

Revisiting The Past

The Butterfly Effect's creators on ditched sequel ideas

A direct-to-DVD sequel emerged in 2006, without the input of original creators Eric Bress and Jonathan Mackye Gruber or star Ashton Kutcher. Bress and Gruber did have their own idea for a follow-up, but history had different plans.

"It was almost like a *The Man In The High Castle*-type story," Gruber says, referring to Philip K Dick's 1962 alternate history novel. "We'd take viewers down Fifth Avenue in New York City and the Nazis had won the war."

While that didn't come to pass, the idea of returning to the story has lingered, especially as younger viewers discover the first movie. "The spirit of the film has never left us," says Bress. "We'd love to go back into this world as older and more mature writers and see what new layers we could add."

© AMAZON STUDIOS

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

PAOLO BACIGALUPI

Renaissance man: why the American SF luminary turned to fantasy

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by JT Thomas Photography

FROM A MAN WHOSE LATEST BOOK IS A 500-page-plus fantasy, it's an incongruous remark. "I was trying to figure out whether I still wanted to write," Paolo Bacigalupi says of the exercise in "creative play" that resulted in *Navola*, his remarkable new novel steeped in the violence, intrigue and beauty of Renaissance-era Florence.

"Some of this is probably oversharing, but fuck it," he adds. "I was basically doing a lot of creative writing where I would write 500 words a day on anything I wanted, and trying to find my way into whether or not even the act of writing was interesting. One of the things that I ended up playing with was this story about dragons and trying to think of a way to write about dragons that hadn't been done before – and then just to explore, and not to be thinking about, 'Oh, who's my audience for this?' Or, 'What will people think if I shift gears?'"

So it was that Bacigalupi, a man more associated with SF novels that grapple with climate change and ecological catastrophe, came up with *Navola*'s ominous opening line: "My father kept a dragon eye upon his desk."

"That line started opening up doorways, and every doorway that was available, I would deliberately walk through it," Bacigalupi says of a process of discovery that involved asking questions, and finding connections.

Who would own a crystalline dragon eye, a rare and precious artefact? A "wealthy merchant banker" who uses it as "a sigil of his own power". Why merchant banking? In part because Bacigalupi had, on a friend's recommendation, read a book about Florence's ruling family, *Medici Money* by Tim Parks. This looked like a fun sandpit to play in.

RISING SON

Navola came into focus, a story not just of a powerful family but of a son, Davico di Regulai. He is being trained to inherit the family business, but is unsuited to the role. "He's a little more trusting than everybody else," explains Bacigalupi. "He's a little kinder than everyone else, and those are weaknesses in the novel's society."

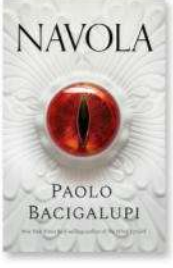
Even then, the book might never have seen the light of day had Bacigalupi not realised that part of the mass of material he had assembled constituted a coherent story. "I shaved that chunk of the larger story off, offered that to my agent and was like, 'Okay, here's this thing I've been playing around with. Do you think there's any merit in it?'" A few weeks later, an offer was on the table and Bacigalupi was officially a fantasy novelist.

BIODATA

From **Paonia, Colorado**

Greatest Hits
***The Windup Girl* (2009) won both the Nebula and Hugo Awards. *The Water Knife* (2015) is also worth seeking out, while Bacigalupi has also enjoyed success as a YA writer.**

Random Fact
While developing *Navola*, Bacigalupi spent time in Bologna on holiday with an American friend. Speaking only Italian, they immersed themselves in the language.



Since he made his name with *The Windup Girl*, a Thailand-set biopunk thriller, this could be seen as quite a swerve. Except, as Bacigalupi tells it, there were similarities in the writing process. Writing his debut, he was "holding nothing back" but pushing to see where the story might go. Having had four novels rejected, he expected the same to happen again, but didn't let it constrain him.

The book's subsequent success came as a huge surprise. The workload that followed was heavy, as Bacigalupi followed two tracks – writing both YA fiction and two adult novels: *The Water Knife*, a tale of H2O shortages in a future America, and the eco-disaster-themed *The Tangled Lands*, co-written with Tobias Buckell.

WHAT PRICE SUCCESS?

"General exhaustion" set in as the political situation around the election of Donald Trump, "a period of the United States when we seemed particularly insane" combined with Bacigalupi's own deep concern over the ecological issues underpinning his fiction. "What I noticed was that all of my creative work was pretty much just echoing the terrors of the day, the fears of the moment," he remembers, "and it wasn't adding anything to the conversation."

Underpinning all of this was Bacigalupi's own lack of preparation for success. "I didn't understand this for a long time, but it's actually very intense being successful," he says. "It sounds silly to complain about it – it's like, 'Oh, my diamond shoes are too tight.' But there negative things that happen along with all the positive things."

In particular, Bacigalupi found certain kinds of critiques of his fiction stressful, like the idea – arguably associated with both the left and right in public debates, and prevalent on social media – that fiction "should be instructional, should be morally hygienic, should act as some sort of, I don't know... toilet brush for society's mind".

So are things better now? It would seem so. While an exploration of the relationship between mankind and the rest of nature subtly underpins *Navola*, writing fantasy seems to have freed up Bacigalupi. Having always done his scientific research, he's had to learn to disengage his "science fiction brain" from his work. While writing the book, he says, he would think, "'Let's back out and try that again, as if we're *experiencing* this, as opposed to categorising this.'" There are, it turns out, different ways to get through doorways.

Navola is published by Head Of Zeus on 4 July.

> “I didn’t understand this for a long time, but it’s actually intense being successful”

Subscribe to SFX

WORLD EXCLUSIVE!
DOCTOR WHO
All-access for season one with Ncuti Gatwa and Millie Gibson
KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES
More movie monkey business
PLUS! STAR TREK: DISCOVERY / BLOOD HUNT / DARK M
GODZILLA / THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAG
A QUIET PLACE: DAY ONE
HOW THE TERROR BEGAN!
HOUSE OF THE DRAGON
MORE FIRE, MORE BLOOD
EXCLUSIVE!
LET'S HEAR IT FOR...
THE BOYS
IS VOUGHT'S TIME FINALLY UP?
DOCTOR WHO
ON SET WITH BONNIE LANGFORD
MAXXXINE
TI WEST'S TRILOGY CONCLUDES
SUPACELL
POWER TO THE PEOPLE
LONGLEGS
NIC CAGE'S NEW HORROR FILM
PLUS! THE WATCHED / SECRET WARS / WILLIAM SHATNER / RESIDENT ALIEN
SUNNY / X-MEN / ANANSI BOYS / 2000 AD / THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT
ZILLA X KONG
BEAST WARS!
FALLOUT
WORLD EXCLUSIVE!
TAR TREK:
COVERY
AT THEIR FINAL FRONTIER
WRECK
DOCTOR WHO
BUILDING A GOBLIN ARMY
SIDENT ALIEN / DOCTOR STRANGE
2 / GHOSTBUSTERS / X-MEN '97

... and get all these benefits

• Never miss an issue! • No more traipsing to the shops in the rain – have the mag delivered to your door! • Pay significantly less than the shop price • Print subscribers also get a digital issue • Free access to a huge library of digital back issues* • The satisfaction of knowing you're helping to keep the editorial team off the streets!

See page 23 for our latest special offer and full terms and conditions. *Issues dating back to *SFX* 189 (December 2009) are available on the *SFX* magazine app; issues dating back to *SFX* 227 (November 2012) via the Pocketmags app.

JULY 2024

Reviews

edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 74 | TV 78 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 80 | BOOKS 86 | COMICS 92 | GAMES & STUFF 94

THIS ISSUE 65 REVIEWS

74 FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA

A Taylor-Joy to behold

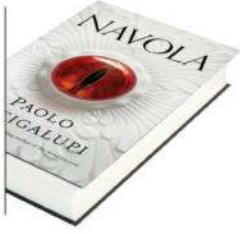
Highlights

78 STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

→ Michael Burnham and co bow out with a race to find ancient technology.

80 THE FLESH & BLOOD SHOW

→ A Blu-ray box set showing the grimy, grisly oeuvre of horror director Pete Walker.



86 NAVOLA

→ Paolo Bacigalupi's impressive first fantasy novel is set in a world inspired by 15th century Florence.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

FURIOSA: A MAD MAX SAGA

Girl power

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 148 minutes

Director **George Miller**

Cast **Anya Taylor-Joy, Chris Hemsworth, Tom Burke, Alyla Browne**

"You have about you a purposeful savagery!" says a character to the young Furiosa (Anya Taylor-Joy) in George Miller's prequel to *Mad Max: Fury Road*. And purposeful savagery is as good a way as any to describe what the veteran director has in store for us in his latest outsized orgy of post-apocalyptic mayhem.

When we first met Furiosa in *Fury Road*, in the buzzcut-sporting shape of Charlize Theron, she was a metal-armed liberator of imprisoned females whose skills behind the wheel made her a match for any man, or indeed Max. The new film backtracks 15 years or so to explain how she came to lose her locks, a limb and her mother (Charlee Fraser), whose attempts to recover her child after she's abducted by foot-soldiers of the wasteland warlord Dementus (Chris Hemsworth) occupy the first of five novelistic chapters.

The four that follow show the now-orphaned Furiosa learn the art of road war from big-rig driver Jack (Tom Burke) while secretly plotting revenge against Hemsworth's bare-chested braggadocio. As we've come to expect from a series that started way back in 1979 with a then-unknown Mel Gibson, there are loads of high-speed confrontations between various vehicular mash-ups before she gets revenge.

Less expected, and less welcome, is the dispute between Dementus and the masked Immortan Joe (Lachy Hulme, in a role he inherited from the late Hugh Keays-Byrne), a banal feud involving gasoline and cabbages that buries much of the film's midsection in machinations and subterfuge.

With his giant schnozz, Biblical beard and penchant for flamboyant speechifying, Dementus offers plenty for Hemsworth to sink his teeth into in the actor's first stab at grandstanding villainy. Even with Theron's template to build on, though, Taylor-Joy struggles to make an impact on what should have been her movie.

Having teenager Alyla Browne play Furiosa in the initial two segments means that Anya does not appear on-screen for over an hour. And when she does she scarcely speaks a word, Miller and co-writer Nick Lathouris apparently believing that a "less is more" approach was called for.

Taylor-Joy is certainly capable of projecting a stern-faced, wide-eyed urgency, particularly in a terrific sequence that finds her crawling beneath a tanker as it comes under attack from a horde of paragliding bandits.

Too often, though, she's sidelined into irrelevance, without the benefit of dialogue to impose her personality upon proceedings. The chapter structure doesn't help, sapping the story's momentum at points when it ought to be gathering steam, while the reliance on CG is both relentless and obtrusive.

Whenever Miller allows himself to let rip, however, all gripes are forgotten, such is the 79-year-old auteur's mastery of the blistering all-action set-piece.

Neil Smith

"So why do they call you Furiosa?" "..."

i The sequence Miller dubbed "Stowaway to Nowhere" lasts 15 minutes, includes 197 shots and took 78 days to complete.

ARCADIAN

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 12 JUNE

15 | 92 minutes

Director **Benjamin Brewer**

Cast **Nicolas Cage, Jaeden Martell, Maxwell Jenkins, Sadie Soverall**

Monster bugs have taken over the world, leaving the few human survivors to scavenge for supplies by day and cower inside by night behind barricaded doors.

In a farmhouse in the countryside, Paul (Nicolas Cage) and his two boys, Joseph (Jaeden Martell) and Thomas (Maxwell Jenkins), live a monastic existence that allows them to keep the predators at bay. Thomas, though, has fallen for a girl from a neighbouring encampment, and his daily trips to see her are putting the family at risk.

Cut from the same cloth as *A Quiet Place* and *Attack The Block*, Benjamin Brewer's lo-fi horror tale offers generic thrills in a minor key while leaving lots of questions unanswered. How did the apocalypse happen? How many bugs are there? And where does Cage get his cigars from, let alone his hair dye?

On the creature design front, however, *Arcadian* plays a blinder, its Big Bads (giant hairy tarantulas with gaping maws that judder like jackhammers) presenting a genuinely scary threat to life and limb. A scene where Martell traps one by using himself as bait is a particularly spine-tingling moment.

And while a mid-film mishap keeps Paul off-screen for much of the second half, there's still enough of Cage's star power to elevate the material.

Neil Smith

IF

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 104 minutes

Director **John Krasinski**

Cast **Cailey Fleming, Ryan Reynolds, John Krasinski, Phoebe Waller-Bridge**

Oh look, yet another movie about a kid losing a parent; why does Hollywood hate them?

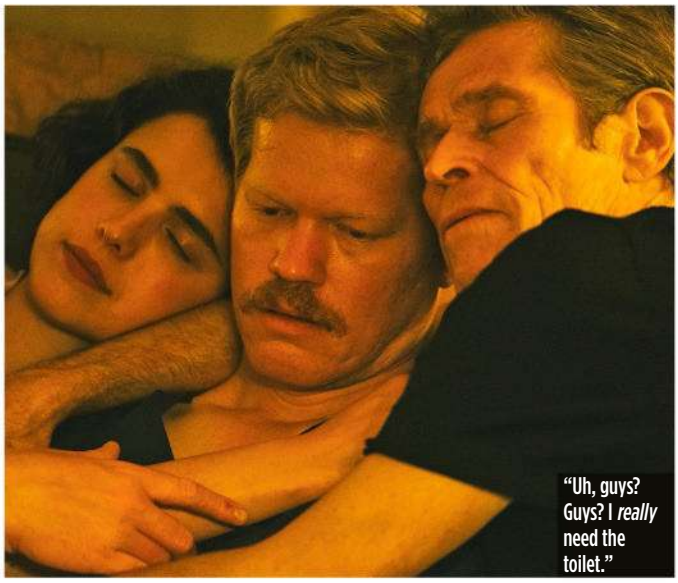
This film's grieving sprog is 12-year-old Bea (*The Walking Dead*'s Cailey Fleming, excellent), who's still getting over the loss of her mum a few years back – something compounded by the fact that her dad (John Krasinski) now needs heart surgery.

While staying in New York with her gran (Fiona Shaw, wonderful), Bea meets Cal (Ryan Reynolds) – who, like her, can see an assortment of weird creatures. They're IFs (imaginary friends) who linger, useless, long after their children have grown up. Bea and Cal set out to reunite these monsters with their old companions.

Written and directed by Krasinski, *IF* has many issues. Its magical world-building makes no sense, with no consensus on how the IFs are supposed to interact with humans. Despite the silly monsters and celebrity vocals, it isn't funny: even the usually charming Reynolds is grim-faced throughout.

One thing that *does* work is the film's sentimentality – set to nuclear levels, with extra plutonium provided by Michael Giacchino's score (every violin on Earth is here). Under the onslaught of his strings, you may find a tear in your eye... but nothing else in *IF* connects the way it should.

Jayne Nelson



KINDS OF KINDNESS

Three's a crowd

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 28 JUNE

TBC | 165 minutes

Directors **Yorgos Lanthimos**

Cast **Emma Stone, Jesse Plemons, Willem Dafoe, Hong Chau, Margaret Qualley**

If there's any kindness in Yorgos Lanthimos's latest wild and weird work, it's hard to find. The director behind *Poor Things* is back with another surreal meditation on human frailties and flaws. Reuniting some of his collaborators on that film, including Emma Stone, Willem Dafoe and cinematographer Robbie Ryan, it's a warped comedy that defiantly wades into surreal terrain, as the cast all play multiple roles across its trio of short films.

In the first segment, Jesse Plemons is Robert, a man whose life is dictated by suave Svengali-figure Raymond (Dafoe), who provides him with a daily list of instructions, such as "no sexual intercourse". Stone briefly pops up as a mysterious woman in heels, although it's Plemons who takes the plaudits (as he does throughout). Part two sees him play Daniel, a cop whose wife Liz (Stone) has disappeared; when she returns, he's convinced she's an imposter. The increasingly gory way that Daniel tests her devotion lends the short the feel of a horror, one that surrealist Luis Buñuel might have appreciated.

The weakest of the trio, the final episode sees Stone's Emily entering a strange cult offering spiritual and sexual enlightenment, run by Dafoe's guru Omi, who is quick to reject his followers when they stray. It's a particularly baffling episode in a film that will test the patience of many.

What it all means is hard to say, but cruelty and control seem to define this absurdist alternate reality. With actors pushed out of their comfort zones and audiences left unnerved, it's a troubling film that will alienate many, typified by Jerskin Fendrix's unsettling score. A second viewing could well be required to grasp its subtleties, but whether you'll feel inclined to show such devotion to the Lanthimos cause is another matter. **James Mottram**

ℹ Filming took place in New Orleans, with the shorts shot back-to-back, each taking three weeks to film.

A HOUSE IN JERUSALEM

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 104 minutes

Director **Muayad Alayan**

Cast **Miley Locke, Johnny Harris, Sheherazade Makhoul Farrell, Souad Feres**

Palestinian director Muayad Alayan creeps into genre territory with *A House In Jerusalem*, though his politically freighted ghost story is less concerned with screw-turning thrills and chills than, say, Babak Anvari's *Under The Shadow*.

An understated affair that unfolds mostly in brilliant sunlight, it sees a grief-stricken Michael (Johnny Harris) relocating from the UK to the Israeli capital after the death of his wife. But it's his daughter Rebecca (Miley Locke) that the film's most interested in, taking her perspective as she begins to glimpse a mysterious girl of her own age.

More interested in heartache than scares, Alayan, through Rebecca's sleuthing, carefully unpackages a backstory pertaining to Israel's victory in the 1948 war, with our young heroine at one point sneaking off to a displaced persons camp in nearby Bethlehem to search for answers. Here, the black of night provides an ominous counterbalance to the constantly beating sun.

Always engaging if rarely enthralling, this supernatural drama is well-performed, calmly delivers a couple of neat surprises in the final act, and exerts an emotional tug that's intensified by the current horrors of the Gaza war.

Jamie Graham

THE STRANGERS: CHAPTER 1

★½☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 91 minutes

Director **Renny Harlin**

Cast **Madelaine Petsch, Rachel Shenton, Gabriel Basso, Froy Gutierrez**

The central premise here is a chilling one: that a group of homicidal lunatics can invade your home with just a desire to kill, based on wholly impersonal motives. The concept was best executed in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*, but the *Strangers* films have made for some solid entries in this subgenre.

The 2008 Liv Tyler and Scott Speedman-starring original supplied some decent scares as "Dollface", "Man in The Mask" and "Pin-Up Girl" tormented the unsuspecting couple. Sequel *The Strangers: Prey At Night* had its moments too, but with the puzzlingly titled *The Strangers: Chapter 1*, the dead horse is well and truly being flogged, with a creatively bankrupt cash-grab.

A bland, privileged couple are on a cross-country road trip when their car breaks down, and they have to rent an isolated Airbnb, only to be targeted by the masked trio. Every beat of the subsequent stalking and stabbing is rote and predictable, and without any legitimate scares, the once sinister masks just look silly.

For horror fans it's not just over-familiar but insulting, assuming that reheating the blandest elements of the original will have them on tenterhooks. It may not be personal, but this film feels like a slap in the face. **Leila Latif**

Sash £9.99 from New Look, fur by Weta.

KINGDOM OF THE PLANET OF THE APES

The Primate Leap Forward

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

12A | 145 minutes

Directors **Wes Ball**

Cast **Owen Teague, Freya Allan, Kevin Durand, Peter Macon**

Jumping forward "many generations", the tenth *Apes* outing both induces a warm glow of nostalgia via callbacks to the 1968 original (like a frenetic "human hunt"), and refreshes the franchise by creating the space for some impressive world-building.

The first act is a triumph in this regard, introducing an ape community unlike any we've seen before. Home to Noa, an innocent young chimp, its people have developed bonding rituals with eagles, and constructed structures around old electricity pylons. The decaying remains of human civilisation are much in evidence elsewhere too: skyscrapers overgrown with vegetation, skewered by trees. It's an impressively detailed, beautifully realised world.

As Noa embarks on a quest for justice, joined by an erudite orangutan and a mysteriously intelligent human woman, there's a sense of territory rich for further exploration – an unexpected herd of zebras neatly encapsulating its potential for surprises.

It's no clean slate. Andy Serkis's Caesar remains a throughline, his legacy contested as new Big Bad Proximus – a bonobo dictator intent on harnessing human science – warps the teaching "Apes together strong" into something more akin to a fascist slogan.

On reaching Proximus's coastal stronghold the film loses some of its lustre, as the focus narrows to a race to enter a vault full of manmade weapons. Still, you come away feeling that the saga's potential is far from exhausted, especially if the producers continue to explore heterogeneous ape communities with their own distinct cultures. **Ian Berriman**

i Kevin Durand prepped for playing Proximus by watching "charismatic speakers" like life coach Tony Robbins.

SORCERY

★★★½☆

RELEASED 14 JUNE

15 | 101 minutes

Director **Christopher Murray**

Cast **Valentina Véliz, Daniel Antivilo, Sebastian Hülk**

Inspired by a true story – the 1880 trial of members of an organisation called La Recta Provincia, accused of witchcraft – this historical tale is remarkably subtle.

The setting: Chiloé, an island off Chile's west coast – which if this gloomy, rain-drenched film is anything to go by, must be a forbidding place to live. Colonisation, and resistance to it, are central themes. The protagonist is 13-year-old Rosa, a servant of German settlers, and a Christian.

When the family's flock is killed, the blame falls on her father, who has the dogs set on him – with fatal results. After appealing without success to the Mayor and the Church, Rosa turns to the beliefs of the indigenous Huilliche people in order to find justice.

The execution couldn't be more understated. Both leads – Valentina Véliz as Rosa, and Daniel Antivilo as Mateo, the fisherman who takes her in – underplay it beautifully, keeping melodrama at arm's length. Often what's spoken is just the tip of the iceberg. The treatment of witchcraft is ambiguous – the Huilliche may have the power to change into dogs, and similarly alter others, but we never see anything as crass as a transformation.

With its circling birds, tangled woods and sinister noises off, it's a film that's elegantly ominous, and highly suggestive, but resistant to being pinned down. **Ian Berriman**

THE PRESENT

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

PG | 87 minutes

Director **Christian Ditter**

Cast **Isla Fisher, Greg Kinnear, Ryan Guzman, Easton Rocket Sweda**

With shades of *Back To The Future* and *Happy Death Day*, and a dash of *The Parent Trap*, time travel comedy *The Present* is very much standing on the shoulders of giants.

Isla Fisher and Greg Kinnear play a couple on the verge of separation – a state of affairs which their kids are keen to avoid at all costs, with the help of a magical grandfather clock (don't ask).

As the rules state that the clock can only turn time back 12 hours (again, don't ask), the parents' three children – two teenagers and a mute pre-teen who communicates using a Barack Obama voice app – have to find increasingly elaborate ways to rekindle their parents' marriage, from vandalising the flat which Dad is planning to move into, to spiking a romantic lunch between Mum and one of her fitness class.

Sadly, writer Jay Martel's screenplay doesn't offer up much ingenuity or fully exploit the time travel concept (it's also, given Martel's past work on the *Key & Peele* show, surprisingly LOL-free). Whether the kids will succeed or not is never in much doubt, but the way they – and the film – finally unite this warring couple is stupefyingly banal, relying less on time travel pyrotechnics and coming across more like something from a bargain-bin romcom, ending the film on the weakest of whimpers.

Steve O'Brien

DEEP SEA

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

TBC | 112 minutes

Director **Xiaopeng Tian**

Cast **Tingwen Wan, Su Xin, Kuixing Teng, Yang Ting**

This Chinese CG animated film invites comparisons with *Spirited Away* and the *Spider-Verse* movies. It's not as good as those, but still remarkable. Like *Spirited Away*, it's about a little girl lost in a scary-funny magic world. Like the *Spider-Verse* movies, it has mind-bogglingly, exhaustingly dense visuals. Much of the film has the texture of trembling liquid, keeping you marvelling at what you're seeing, though the story sometimes palls.

Shenxiu is estranged from her dad and step-mum. Falling from a cruise ship, she's swept to a submarine-restaurant, encountering fishy and furry folk, and an alarmingly wide-mouthed youth named Nanaha. The opening is great, making us share in Shenxiu's melancholia before plunging us and her into a terrible sea whose water is overwhelming, yet has a hyperreal beauty.

Once we're on the sub, there are more relentless, slippery set-pieces and shouty characters, but little to connect with emotionally. Shenxiu is very passive, and her relationships with Nanaha and the other crew are thin.

Some of the time, the film slips into beautiful tedium – until a last-act development that's guessable but still hugely powerful, throwing characters back into the water to struggle for their lives. Be warned: the climax goes to darker places than Disney or Pixar films do.

Andrew Osmond

SASQUATCH SUNSET

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 14 JUNE

15 | 88 minutes

Director **David Zellner**

Cast **Jesse Eisenberg, Riley Keough, Christophe Zajac-Denek, Nathan Zellner**

If you're someone who wishes that more directors would get the cash to take wilder swings at subjects instead of sitting through the 79th variant of franchise filmmaking, then *Sasquatch Sunset* may appeal.

With writer/directors David and Nathan Zellner expanding on their shorts, this arthouse quirk-fest features the likes of Jesse Eisenberg and Riley Keough as sasquatches living in a hazy, beautifully shot northern California forest. And... that's basically it in terms of concept and plotline. They eat. They sleep. They groom. They copulate. There is the lurking encroachment of human presence. Some loss.

Unfortunately it's so slight (zero dialogue beyond guttural grunts, howls, roars and one snatch of music) that it never quite holds your attention. Stabs at zany comedy, meanwhile (such as the creatures holding up a turtle as though it's a phone) break the illusion to annoying effect. You almost wish for a David Attenborough-style narration to tie the nature footage together.

Eisenberg and Keogh in particular do what they can to emote through their (admittedly impressive) suits and make-up, but the storyline and languid tone don't support them, and they're lost in a sea of shit and piss jokes. **James White**

TAROT

★½☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 92 minutes

Directors **Anna Halberg, Spenser Cohen**

Cast **Harriet Slater, Jacob Batalon, Avantika, Adain Bradley**

Tarot can be spooky. Sometimes in a reading you'll experience moments of insight that feel uncannily accurate or which later prove eerily prescient. Does that mean there's anything to it? Probably not, but there's the potential for a genuinely unsettling horror story that exploits that feeling. This, however, is very much not that film.

A group of teens rent a mansion in the Catskill Mountains to celebrate one of their number's birthday, only to discover a mysterious – and needlessly creepy – hand-painted tarot deck. Breaking an apparent "unspoken rule" to never use someone else's cards, the group are then offed one by one in a series of mysterious accidents that echo the cards which they each drew.

You don't need to be an expert at reading the cards to see that *Tarot* is terrible, a frightless *Final Destination* knock-off with zero tension in which a set of bland, personality-free characters stumble into pedestrian death scenes. It's both incredibly dark – in the sense of very dingy visuals – and extremely dull.

There are, at least, some okay creature designs matching specific tarot archetypes like the High Priestess, and Jacob Batalon (comic relief Ned in the MCU *Spider-Man* films) raises a half-smile. Still, we foresee a dark fate for this film: it will be forgotten entirely. **Will Salmon**

STAR TREK: DISCOVERY

Season Five

Raiders Of The Last Arc

★★★½☆

- UK/US **Paramount+, streaming now**
- Showrunners **Alex Kurtzman, Michelle Paradise**
- Cast **Sonequa Martin-Green, Doug Jones, Mary Wiseman, David Ajala**

EPISODES 5.01-5.10 **Why do so many** shows have a habit of getting good again just before cancellation? Because while *Discovery*'s final season is far from the best *Trek* ever, it's a breath of fresh air after season four, which felt like a show begging to be put out of its misery. The psychoanalysis season, in which everyone – even the ship's computer – went into therapy, and no one could even go for a dump without delivering some great wodge of explanatory backstory.

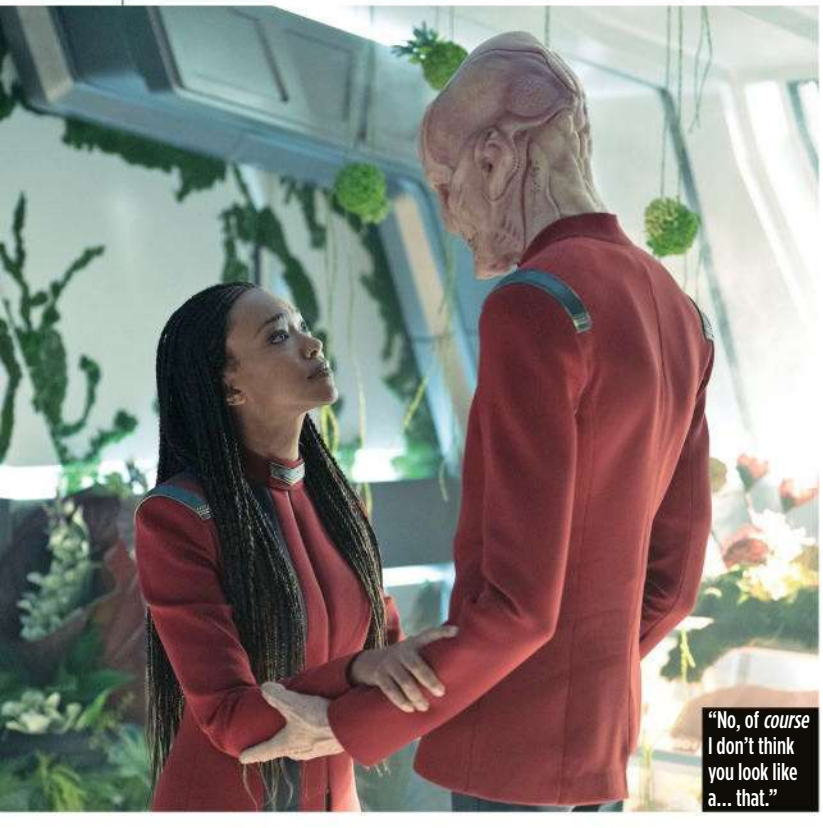
Season five is livelier, more action-packed, more colourful and more fun. It's also, essentially, *Raiders Of the Lost Ark* or *Tomb Raider* for 10 episodes (though old-school *Doctor Who* fans might be thinking, "Oooh, 'The Key To Time!'"). It's a race across the universe between our heroes and a couple of loveably roguish villains to find five mystical objects which, when brought together, will give the wielder access to A GREAT POWER – in this case the tech that created life in the first place. ("But who created the people who created life?" is, of course, a question asked in typical *Trek* style at one point).

The tech, and the race who created it, were first referenced way back in a season six episode of *The Next Generation*, "The Chase" – a fun romp itself, with Picard going full Indiana Jones in a race with the Klingons, Cardassians and Romulans to solve an ancient genetic puzzle (which provided an excuse for why most sentient beings in the Trekverse look humanoid).

That one episode – both in terms of plot and vibe – has essentially been expanded to a full season here, ending one of the franchise's most controversial series on an unexpectedly upbeat note. Certainly the regulars seem to be experiencing less angst and having more fun.

Michael literally starts the season shuttle-surfing and loving it. There are more variations in settings after the rather spaceship- and space station-heavy season four, from alien forests to desert planets, with some gorgeous cinematography and effects. The new regulars and semi-regulars have some spark and life to them, particularly the delightfully dour new first officer Rayner (Callum Keith Rennie), who's practically a live-action Shaxs from *Lower Decks*, and the two rogues who are in the chase for the prize: Moll (Eve Harlow) and renegade Breen L'ak (Elias Toufexis).

Okay, the Breen are buffoonish and one-dimensional bad guys. There are some goofy moments, the plotting is pure *Zelda*-style puzzle-solving procedural, and the politicking is laughably unsophisticated for a franchise that gave us *Deep Space Nine*. And boy, does the final episode give the last half of *The Return Of The King* a run for its money... But at least *Discovery* goes out leaving you wanting more. **Dave Golder**



i Shelley Owens, a regular background actress since the first season, utters her first line of dialogue in episode seven.

TP BON

Season One

★★★½☆

- UK/US **Netflix, streaming now**
- Director **Masahiro Ando**
- Cast **Akihisa Wakayama, Atsumi Tanezaki, Mamoru Miyano, Ayako Takeuchi**

EPISODES 1.01-1.12 **Even for** anime, *TP Bon* is a very strange show. This time-travel toon is mostly silly, childish and innocent, closer to the cheesy '90s cartoons of *Bill & Ted* and *Back To The Future* than anything like *Rick And Morty*. Yet it blithely drops in images of torture and beheading to mentally scar any tot stumbling upon it. Anime, eh?

Japanese schoolboy Bon encounters the Time Patrol, a future organisation with the *Quantum Leap*-ish job of saving ordinary people from tragic deaths. Accepted as a trainee, and mentored by pretty girl Ream and her jelly-like companion Buyoyan, Bon heads off for adventures through history: the Jurassic era, ancient Greece and Egypt, the Wild West and the Second World War.

The show's time-travel rules are hilariously outrageous nonsense and Bon and Ream are bland characters (though Buyoyan is rather more fun). What makes the series a surprisingly good watch are its wide-ranging settings, gorgeously beautiful backdrops and strong action scenes.

There's even a story of a kamikaze pilot's obsession with martyrdom – a politically bold subject to depict in a Japanese series. You also won't have long to wait for more: season two debuts on 17 July. **Tom Arden**

X-MEN '97

Mutants re-animated

★★★★☆

UK/US **Disney+, streaming now**

Creator **Beau DeMayo**

Cast **Ray Chase, Jennifer Hale, Matthew Waterson, Alison Sealy-Smith**

After years of teases, Marvel Studios' first X-Men project has finally arrived, and it'd be easy to mistake it for shameless nostalgia-bait. *X-Men '97* is a direct continuation of the much-loved '90s animated show, imagining the episodes that could have aired if it hadn't been cancelled in 1997.

The show goes out of its way to be faithful in both approach and visual style (just with significantly upgraded animation, especially in the action sequences). The season kicks off with the X-Men reeling from Charles Xavier's apparent assassination, while the twist that he's left control of the team to his longtime frenemy Magneto drives much of the conflict. Viewers used to the narrative style of the *X-Men* movies may not be prepared for how fully the show embraces the complexity and weirdness of the X-Men saga. There's a lot to take onboard, especially with some of the bonkers plot twists in the first few episodes – plus, instead of Marvel movies' usual quippy postmodernism, this is brazenly earnest and unironic fare, perfectly capturing the "soap opera with superpowers" nature of classic *X-Men* comics.

The giddy nostalgia of the initial chapters also turns out to be something of a feint, as from episode five onwards, the show turns on a penny and transforms into a much darker beast. Delivering brutal shocks and harsher violence, these later episodes explore the X-Men's evergreen themes of tolerance and prejudice with more impact than any previous on-screen adaptation.

> **Brazenly earnest and unironic fare**

The downside of this is that even in these stronger moments, the fidelity to the '90s cartoon also means inheriting that show's weaknesses (most notably, some creaky and *wildly* melodramatic dialogue). Despite this, however, *X-Men '97* remains a compulsive watch throughout its 10 episodes, and sets a high bar to clear for any future live-action X-Men projects. **Saxon Bullock**

"I hope you all brought your disco shoes. Now DANCE!"

i An *X-Men '97* episode of Marvel making-of show *Assembled* is also now available to watch on Disney+.

THE WALKING DEAD: THE ONES WHO LIVE

(... And laugh and love)

★★★★☆

UK **Sky Max/NOW, Fridays/streaming now**

US **AMC, streaming now**

Creators **Scott M Gimple, Danai Gurira, Andrew Lincoln**

Cast **Andrew Lincoln, Danai Gurira, Pollyanna McIntosh, Terry O'Quinn**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Finally! This** *Walking Dead* spin-off has lingered in limbo on this side of the pond while the franchise searched for a new UK home. It was worth the wait: it's a satisfying sequel that offers a fresh perspective on a very familiar world.

As *The Walking Dead*'s final episode established, Rick Grimes is still alive, in the custody of the CRM – the military wing of advanced community the Civic Republic. After a number of escape attempts, he's drafted into the military, but clings onto the idea of finding his family. Meanwhile, Michonne (Danai Gurira) has her own reasons to hate the CRM: dead friends and a chlorine gas attack that's left her bedridden. Full of rage, she takes on a squad of enemy soldiers – only to come face-to-face with her lost love. But is he still the man she remembers?

Jumping about between different time periods and perspectives, *TOWL* puts us inside the heads of both protagonists, as well as Jadis/Anne (Pollyanna McIntosh) – a morally oblique character in the OG series, now a fervent believer in the CRM's hardline tactics. She's not the only one who's changed; it's clear Rick's starting to believe in the Civic Republic's aims too. These tensions come to a head in the terrific fourth episode, which finds Rick and Michonne sheltering inside a still-functioning smarthome, where they're forced to confront how the last few years have changed them. It's a poignant, tense and funny episode that sets up the final conflict.

Taking down the Republic feels like a season's worth of story, but it's crammed into two episodes here, with a needlessly hasty conclusion. Despite such shortcomings, this is a powerful, poignant, and surprisingly romantic end (?) for *The Walking Dead*'s original heroes. **Will Salmon**

Will they? Won't they? Oh, they already have.

i The *Daryl Dixon* and *Dead City* spin-offs are also heading for Sky; the former's due in August, the latter later in 2024.

Jack Jones, on his Jack Jones, in *The Comeback*.

THE FLESH & BLOOD SHOW

Crime And Punishment

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 17 JUNE
1971-1978 | 18 | Blu-ray
Director **Pete Walker**
Cast **Susan George, Robin Askwith, Stephanie Beacham, Sheila Keith, Susan Penhaligon, Jack Jones, Anthony Sharp**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **"I don't think I** ever made horror movies," said Pete Walker, master of the dank, cruel and distinctly British chiller. "I made terror movies."

It's a distinction explored in this lavish seven-disc box set. Shunning the supernatural and rejecting Hammer's gothic playground in favour of the shadows and decay of the '70s, these are films powered by a very human darkness, where psychopaths, self-righteous crazies and assorted obsessives carve a bloody trail.

Die Screaming, Marianne feels like an outlier: a straight, sunlit Euro thriller that fails to thrill, sunk by a muddled and meandering screenplay. *The Flesh & Blood Show* skews closer to Walker's typical style, as a killer stalks randy theatricals on a dilapidated pier. Not so much a whodunnit as a whogetsitnext, it's very much a seedy English take on an Italian giallo flick, all rot, grot and milk-pale bodies. A gimmicky 3D climax embodies Walker's natural instinct for fairground showmanship.

David McGillivray enters the picture with the bleakly salacious *House Of Whipcord*, in which swinging young models are incarcerated by cracked moralists – seriously, would you trust a man called Mark DeSade? A film critic turned screenwriter, McGillivray sharpens Walker's blade and together they take savage, satirical jabs at the forces of repression.

Frightmare, the strongest film here, is a tale of generational conflict dressed up with a bloody serving of cannibalism, while *House Of Mortal Sin* takes on the church, its prowling, predatory camerawork anticipating John Carpenter's *Halloween*. Look out for some inventively murderous sacred objects, including a poisoned communion wafer...

Schizo misses that ironic edge, proving a more conventional, pseudo-Hitchcockian affair, what Walker called one of his "slash 'n' stalk" movies. *The Comeback* is another lesser entry, though it conjures some effective set-pieces among its longueurs, as a granny-masked maniac menaces crooner Jack Jones.

All seven are showcased here in new HD restorations. Walker's grimy, grisly world has never looked more beautiful.

Extras The audio commentaries (15 in all) deliver an impressive range of voices, from genre experts Samm Deighan and Kim Newman to screenwriter David McGillivray and – albeit in archival form – Walker himself, who's especially revealing about the tribulations of *Die Screaming, Marianne*.

Interviewed across the discs, Walker seems a more impish figure than his dark-hearted body of work suggests: "It's flattering to be called a cult director," he admits, discussing his career (seven minutes), the women in his movies (11 minutes) and his musical collaborators (seven minutes). He also braves an entertaining rapid-fire Q&A from friends and fans (13 minutes), confessing "I just wanted to be controversial."

Also scattered across the set are interviews with cast and crew, from actors Stewart Bevan (four minutes) – also paired with Norman Eshley (14 minutes) – to assistant director Terry Madden (10 minutes), editor Robert Dearberg (seven minutes) and cinematographer Norman Langley (13 minutes). Camera operator Peter Sinclair and director of photography Peter Jessop remember the making of *The Comeback* (seven minutes). It's all good, insightful, occasionally gossipy stuff, but longer edits would have been welcome.

The *House Of Whipcord* disc delivers the most extras, including an interview with Walker dedicated to the making of the movie (11 minutes), a tour of the Gloucestershire main location – now a deeply macabre true crime museum (12 minutes) – and "redux" cuts of two 2004 documentaries. There's also a brief but decent career retrospective (36 minutes) and a celebration of Walker's razor-eyed muse, Sheila Keith (14 minutes). Plus: trailers for all the films.

The package also includes a 56-page book featuring new essays, eight art cards, and two pairs of 3D specs for that romantic evening watching *The Flesh & Blood Show*... **Nick Setchfield**

i Pete Walker cameos as a cyclist in *House Of Whipcord*. He also provided the voice of barrister Mr Brunskill in *Frightmare*.

PANDEMONIUM

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Quarxx**

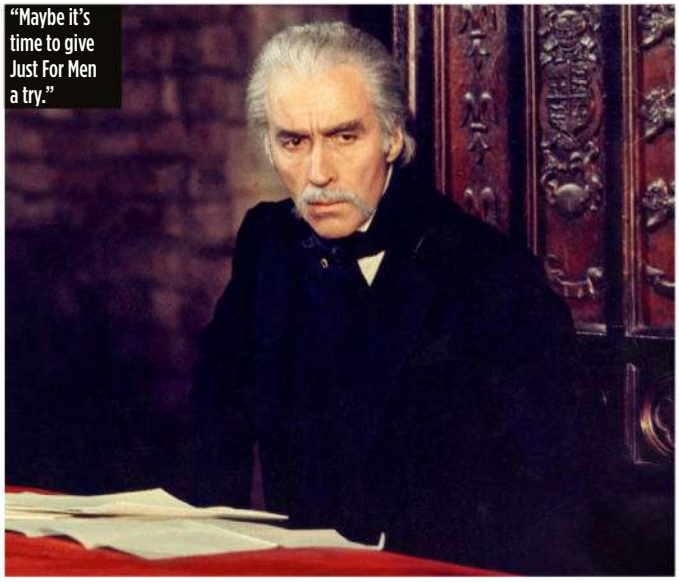
Cast **Hugo Dillon, Arben Bajraktaraj, Manon Maindivide**

Anyone who's seen a few Quentin Dupieux films might detect similarities in the MO of his countryman Quarxx: the same perverse unpredictability. But while not without mordant humour, this is a darker affair.

An anthology film, it opens intriguingly as, in the aftermath of a collision on a mountain road, two men slowly realise they're dead. We follow Nathan (Hugo Dillon) to an ashy grey hellscape, where he's doomed to experience the suffering of others through their stories. Lucio Fulci fans will recognise a visual steal from *The Beyond* – a film which "blew the mind" of the young Quarxx.

These further tales are no less bleak, with denial and guilt recurring themes. In the first, a little girl kills her parents, blaming a deformed imaginary friend. In the second, a mother refuses to accept her daughter's death by suicide. *Pandemonium* is certainly not feelgood fare – seeming, like Nathan's fate, calculated to crush your spirit – but its freeform narrative flow does guarantee surprises.

Extras Quarxx (20 minutes) explains his approach, and an effects guy (seven minutes) discusses "Tony the monster". A third piece (five minutes) explains how they filmed a real birth (Quarxx pretended to be the woman's brother!). A Making Of (23 minutes) supplies behind-the-scenes glimpses from Hell sequences. Plus: premiere footage; trailer; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**



"Maybe it's time to give Just For Men a try."

COUNT DRACULA

By the book

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1970 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Jess Franco**

Cast **Christopher Lee, Herbert Lom, Klaus Kinski, Maria Rohm**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **By the late-'60s,** Christopher Lee was habitually moaning about how far Hammer's Dracula films had strayed from the novel. Jess Franco's Euro-horror gave him the chance to essay a more faithful take on the Count.

A slide promising Bram Stoker's text "exactly as he wrote it" fibs, though. Dracula certainly looks authentic: as in the book, he has a moustache and white hair, gradually de-ageing the more he feeds. He's more verbal too, Lee declaiming passages from the text with relish. But we don't recall a chapter where mangy taxidermy comes to life, with all the blood-freezing terror of *Pipkins*... And other key elements – like the ship the Demeter – are missing.

While more faithful than Hammer's 1958 take, it feels pretty threadbare in comparison: rooms are sparsely furnished; Alsatians stand in for wolves. There's some weirdly haphazard camerawork. And while Herbert Lom impresses as Van Helsing, Klaus Kinski is oddly subdued as the insane Renfield. It's an interesting take, but not any more successful than the Hammers that infuriated Lee.

Extras The reliable Stephen Thrower (45 minutes) astutely skewers some of the film's failings; David Pirie provides a separate overview (23 minutes); a further talking head surveys Lee's other roles in Mediterranean horror films (34 minutes).

Actor Fred Williams (Harker) is deliciously candid (26 minutes). A 1973 audio interview with Lee (20 minutes) is neatly illustrated with stills and clips; there's also an interesting 2006 interview with Franco (27 minutes).

Two different pairings of horror mavens provide chatty commentaries; in a third, the moderator occasionally lets star Maria Rohm get a word in... Plus: an interview with Franco regular Jack Taylor (10 minutes); a short appreciation by French director Christophe Gans (seven minutes); alternate titles; trailer. **Ian Berriman**

i Dracula confronts Van Helsing, but the two actors never met – Christopher Lee started shooting after Herbert Lom finished.

NIGHTWATCH: DEMONS ARE FOREVER

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | N/A | SVOD

Director **Ole Bornedal**

Cast **Fanny Bornedal, Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, Ulf Pilgaard**

SHUDDER **A Danish take on a** Hitchcockian thriller, 1994's *Nightwatch* saw Martin, a student working as a nightwatchman at a morgue, tangled up in a serial killer case, with the necrophile murderer finally unmasked (spoilers!) as the investigating detective.

This 30-years-later sequel sees four cast returning, thanks to a retcon: the bad guy *wasn't* shot dead, but survived. To unearth a tragic backstory her dad's never shared, Martin's daughter takes the same job, then visits the killer in a psychiatric hospital. But this restarts the cycle of violence, placing her family in danger.

Featuring some pleasing callbacks (music on a Walkman; moths trapped in a light fitting), the follow-up has more of a horror vibe – thanks partly to a mystery accomplice rocking a mask modelled on the killer. And there are some effectively tense sequences, with Casper Kjær Jensen stealing the show as a deranged copycat – Renfield to the institutionalised Peter Wörmer's Dracula.

The now de rigueur focus on the traumatic after-effects of violence (we blame David Gordon Green's *Halloween*) proves wearisome, though. You can have too much earnest sincerity, especially when it causes your serial killer thriller to get bogged down. **Ian Berriman**

The time David Lynch made an episode of *Peppa Pig*.

STOPMOTION

Wallace and Vomit

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 18 | 94 minutes

Director **Robert Morgan**

Cast **Aisling Franciosi, Stella Gonet, Tom York, Caoilinn Springall**

SHUDDER **Anyone who's seen** that *The Fast Show* sketch about stop-motion ("Just a tiny amount...") may be sceptical about its potential as a dramatic subject, but animator Robert Morgan's feature-length debut successfully mines the craft for a metaphorical rendering of his love-hate relationship with the process.

It follows Ella (Aisling Franciosi), who works assisting her overbearing mother, a renowned animator. After a stroke leaves mum in a coma, Ella strikes out on her own. Egged on by a mysterious little girl (Caoilinn Springall), she shoots a sinister short featuring a monstrous "Ash Man", using increasingly grotesque materials: first raw meat, then the corpse of a dead fox. You don't get that at Aardman.

Set largely in a single gloomy flat, presented in grotty hues, to a soundtrack of ominous creaks and scrapes, it's considerably creepier than Wallace and Gromit too, with some wince-inducing moments of body horror.

The trajectory of Ella's mental disintegration is fairly predictable, but this as much a strength as it is a weakness, generating a doomy sense of tragic inevitability. Admirers of films like *Censor* and *Saint Maud*, similarly centred on an unravelling female protagonist, should appreciate the results. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Ella's laptop is the director's own laptop – displaying Dragonfire, the animation software he uses himself.

THE SACRAMENT

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED 17 JUNE

2013 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The 1978 mass** suicide/murder orchestrated by Jim Jones is the model for Ti West's taut thriller, with the Peoples Temple substituted by a modern-day cult, and events filmed by a *VICE* camera crew.

The speed at which things go to hell in a hand-cart is winding, and the found-footage conceit stretches credibility (just drop the camera and run!), but the performances have conviction, and the use of handheld camera makes for an immersive experience.

Extras Five interviews; video essay; Making Of. **Ian Berriman**

THE ICE PIRATES

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED 17 JUNE

1984 | 15 | Blu-ray

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Fronted by TV** star Robert Urich, this anarchic space opera finds a bunch of brigands looting precious water reserves in a galaxy blighted by drought.

Mixing cosmic princesses and jive-talkin' pimp-droids, the tone is relentlessly goofball, playing like a cross between a *Saturday Night Live* sketch and some lawyer-dodging Italian *Star Wars* knock-off. The modelwork is decent, but can't save a film forever smirking at itself. Look out for a young Ron Perlman as one of the pirates.

Extras Trailer. **Nick Setchfield**

NEW LIFE

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | N/A | Download

"Genre-bending" has become so trendy of late, it's almost a genre itself.

New Life starts pretty ordinarily – we're in comfortable spy thriller territory, albeit the slower, character-led indie flick variety. Then, halfway through, after a low-key plot twist, the film goes full-blast horror. It's a gear change the movie struggles to make work, and the two sides of the movie don't mesh well together, proving that two fairly impressive halves don't necessarily make a successful whole. **Steve O'Brien**

THE MOON

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★☆☆☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2023 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray/DVD/download

Following a manned lunar mission crippled by solar flares, this South Korean drama is indebted to the likes of *Gravity* and *Apollo 13*, a survival tale of damaged tech and resilience.

Do Kyung-soo (aka DO of K-pop group Exo) makes for a suitably vulnerable lead, and the ambitious effects shots help sell the jeopardy. At over two hours some of the tension inevitably leaks like a punctured spacesuit, but the grounded storytelling has emotion to spare.

Extras Korean/English language. **Nick Setchfield**

THE MOOR

★★★★☆

RELEASED 1 JULY 2024 | TBC | Download

Director **Chris Cronin**

Cast **Sophia La Porta, David Edward-Robertson, Elizabeth Dormer-Phillips**

Beginning more like a true crime doc, and gradually slipping into folk horror/*Blair Witch/Conjuring* territory, this slow-burn indie combines real emotional depth with shiver-inducing eeriness.

Set in a Yorkshire town where, 25 years ago, a series of children were abducted, it taps into both the centuries-old mystique of the moors and their grim modern associations; Ian Brady and Myra Hindley inevitably cast a shadow.

The early focus is the effect of these events on locals – particularly Bill (David Edward-Robertson), who ropes in Claire (Sophia La Porta), a childhood friend of his missing son, to publicise his search for a body. Things get much stranger when a young woman with dowsing abilities joins the hunt.

Whenever we're out on the moor, amid swirling mist and staring sheep, the creep factor shifts up a gear; this is a panic-inducingly unfriendly space where danger – be it from a peat bog or some ancient evil – could be only steps away.

The multifarious ingredients – which include a human killer, a "guardian spirit", standing stones, and a doppelganger – are never neatly tied up in an explanatory bow. This may rile some viewers, though arguably the lack of definitive answers aptly reflects the senselessness of such crimes. Regardless, it's an impressive debut for director Chris Cronin. **Ian Berriman**

ATLAS

Jenny From The Mech

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | PG-13 | SVOD

Director **Brad Peyton**

Cast **Jennifer Lopez, Simu Liu, Mark Strong, Gregory James Cohan**

NETFLIX **It's a mark of just how** real an existential threat Artificial Intelligence feels right now that we buy the premise of Brad Peyton's brash SF actioner from the get-go. And that's despite the opening scene being a blur of frantically edited infodumps, plunging us into a global state of emergency as mankind's clever little digital Frankensteins rebel against their fleshy masters.

Yes, it's the same set-up as last year's *The Creator*, but direct comparisons are soon dodged as the story heads off-world. A time jump of 28 years finds Jennifer Lopez's flinty, emotionally stunted tech expert Atlas Shepherd drafted for a military mission to the Andromeda galaxy, hunting down Harlan (Simu Liu), the AI terrorist who sparked the revolution. We can't be that far into the future, given that someone says "Anyone remember smartphones?", but interplanetary travel is taken for granted – which is a bit puzzling.

> **"Atlas delivers scale and spectacle"**

Just when it's all about to go a bit *Aliens*, the crew of space marines are deep-sixed, leaving J-Lo stranded on a hostile planet with only her mech suit for company. This odd couple dynamic drives the rest of the film, matching the suit's dryly sardonic Jarvis-like persona with an increasingly disgruntled Lopez, who shows us just how many degrees of exasperation the human body can go through.

Despite some tacky CG work in the climax, *Atlas* delivers scale and spectacle, underpinned by a script that nibbles at some genuinely intriguing hard SF ideas and, in its portrayal of buried trauma, a lead performance unafraid to be unlikeable. **Nick Setchfield**

ℹ Neither AI terrorist Harlan or the flashbacks to Atlas's past were in the screenplay Brad Peyton originally received.

(4K X FOUR)

OLD MOVIES NOW AVAILABLE IN UHD

If you're too lazy to visit a cinema for its 14 June reissue you could always buy **STAR TREK III: THE SEARCH FOR SPOCK** (out now). After the Vulcan's death in *The Wrath Of Khan*, Kirk and co discover that his spirit lives on in Bones's mind, stealing the Enterprise for a mission to reunite it with his body, regenerated by the Genesis device. We said: "Powered by character, by the concepts of love and loss... reminds you of a lost age when *Star Trek* dared to truly move you." In the 2016 South Korean horror **TRAIN TO BUSAN** (out now), passengers on a bullet train are menaced by speedster zombies created by a biotech leak. We said: "Piling on the tension until you're digging your nails into your palms, it's a runaway train of a movie." Joining it on UHD is 2020 sequel **TRAIN TO BUSAN PRESENTS PENINSULA** (out now). Channelling John Carpenter and George Romero, it sees four refugees lured back to the overrun Korean peninsula to recover $20 million from an abandoned truck. We said: "Propulsive action is the focus, and often it feels like you're watching a videogame... Its demolition derby car chases are diverting enough." *South Park* creators Trey Parker and Matt Stone's politically incorrect puppet show **TEAM AMERICA: WORLD POLICE** (24 June) plunges a *Thunderbirds*-style hero team into the War Against Terror, mocking peacenik actors and action movie blockbusters. We said: "The puppets are eerily expressive, the miniature sets magnificent. Shame the same level of invention didn't go into the script."

THE LAWNMOWER MAN COLLECTION

Virtual Insanity

★★☆☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1992/1996 | 15 | Blu-ray

Directors **Brett Leonard, Farhad Mann**

Cast **Jeff Fahey, Pierce Brosnan, Patrick Bergin, Matt Frewer**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Marketed as the** world's first VR movie, *The Lawnmower Man* was actually just a modern Frankenstein tale (VR experiments give learning disabled man enhanced IQ and telepathy) with a zeitgeisty twist that really caught the imagination of audiences at the time. It was ropey as hell, but the visuals were groundbreaking. Today they're just primitively quaint – though the film's iconic cybersex moment remains strangely powerful.

The Director's Cut (33 minutes longer) reinstates a huge amount of backstory and has a completely different opening act. It's definitely better. Definitely worse, however, is the sequel, *Beyond Cyberspace*, a bargain-bin *Blade Runner* meets *The Goonies* affair featuring an entirely new cast and crew (barring one child actor). The VR sequences are more polished. Everything else is just about the worst that cinema has to offer.

Extras All the extras have been sourced from previous releases,

> **"The cybersex moment remains powerful"**

Max Headroom's rave period wasn't pretty.

and they all relate to the original film (or Director's Cut), with nothing relating to the sequel. There's a Making Of documentary (51 minutes), the original 1992 EPK (five minutes), a director/producer commentary for the Director's Cut, a photo gallery and two trailers.

There's also a lot of repeated material; are 28 minutes of deleted scenes really deleted when they're all in the Director's Cut (give or take a few seconds)? Many of the images in the concept art gallery (three minutes) turn up in the storyboard comparison (two minutes), and all the VR sequences are edited into a music-backed montage (four minutes). It's recycling gone mad. **Dave Golder**

ℹ The 1975 Stephen King short story on which *The Lawnmower Man* was "based" is nothing to do with VR.

DOCTOR WHO: THE CELESTIAL TOYMAKER

Play For Today

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1966/2024 | PG | Blu-ray/DVD

Director **Bill Sellars**

Cast **William Hartnell, Peter Purves, Jackie Lane, Michael Gough**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **The latest partly** wiped *Who* to be reconstructed using audio and animation originated the Big Bad of 2023 special "The Giggle". Set in the Toymaker's domain, it sees the TARDIS crew forced to play games to win their freedom.

Watching people play games isn't generally interesting though, especially ones as basic as "find the key". So dramatically speaking, it's a dud. The fact that the Doctor is largely absent (William Hartnell took a holiday) doesn't help. Aussie studio Shapeshifter previously animated "The Web Of Fear" part three, with results so poor they beggared belief. This is a big improvement, but still a mixed bag. The mocapped character movement can be uncannily good, but the faces are way off. Steven (Peter Purves) looks like footballer Harry Maguire after falling asleep in a sunbed wearing his shades.

The scale is hugely expanded: the Toymaker frequently looms at titanic size; an obstacle course now has the impossible gravity of an Escher print. The whole notion of "improving" '60s TV remains hubristic. But if they really *must*, a fantasy realm outside the laws of physics is an appropriate subject.

"It wasn't *me*, and it wasn't the robot, so..."

Extras The surviving part four is included, as are reconstructions using off-screen photos. Across five commentaries, guests include Purves, a camera "tracker", a make-up assistant, a dancer and a producer. The highlight is a new regular format, in which teams – in this case, Purves, Maureen O'Brien (Vicki) and Big Finish's Lisa Bowerman – visit a *Who*-themed escape room (74 minutes).

Recalling *The Adventure Game*, it's charming, with the frustration factor bringing out people's personalities. Plus: a 10-minute Making Of; an audio interview with late star Carmen Silvera (10 minutes); an intro from VHS *The Hartnell Years*; extensive gallery (131 stills!); script PDFs. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Episode two had the dubious distinction of being the only *Who* episode to feature the n-word (in an "eeny meeny..." rhyme.)

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS

The Bystanders • *Civil War* • *The First Omen* • *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* • *Imaginary* • *Robot Dreams*

NIGHTSIREN

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Tereza Nvotová**

Cast **Natalia Germani, Eva Mores, Juliana Olhová, Zuzana Konečná**

Though promoted with an emphasis on its debt to supernatural horror, this Slovakian film is at heart a straight drama. Director Tereza Nvotová toys with images of sinisterly staring wolves and naked figures dancing around a bonfire. But ultimately they're put to the service of depicting how superstition and misogyny can still be interwoven in rural areas of her homeland.

On receiving a letter about an inheritance, Šarlota (Natália Germáni) returns to the village she ran away from as a child. Setting up home in a cabin that belonged to a woman scorned as a witch, and forming a bond with another outsider (first seen lying naked in the moonlight), she soon inherits the mantle of scapegoat.

Subtly suggestive at times, rudely earthy at others, it's a film which tackles the expectations and judgements routinely placed upon women without devolving into merely a political treatise; those don't usually come with trippy scenes of writhing, bioluminescent nudity. Just don't go in expecting a "witch horror".

Extras A critical commentary spends 20 minutes establishing terms, with nary a word about what's on-screen. A similarly waffly video essay (11 minutes) wastes half its time recapping the plot. A second essay is astute, but brief (six minutes). A director interview would have been preferable. Plus: trailer; poster; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ABSURD

Taking the Michael

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 24 JUNE

1981 | 18 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Joe D'Amato**

Cast **Luigi Montefiori, Annie Belle, Charles Borromel, Katya Berger**

The latest video nasty to get the UHD treatment is aptly named – though since it began life as a follow-up to cannibal horror *Anthropophagous* (before taking another direction), *Preposterous* might have been even better.

The two films share the same director and writer, with the latter – actor Luigi Montefiori, credited as George Eastman – playing both killers too. *Absurd* is clearly modelled on US slashers, in particular *Halloween*. Montefiori's murderous Mikos not only has recuperative powers (echoing Michael Myers's indestructibility), but a Loomis-like priest (Edmund Purdom) on his trail.

Beyond his towering 6' 9" frame, he's not an iconic figure, though – just a bloke in jeans and trainers. And with absurdities both central to the premise (why is the church doing medical experiments?) and littered throughout you're never far from something scoff-inducing.

The film doesn't really live up to its DPP list status either. A death-by-oven is memorably unpleasant. Otherwise, vegetarians are most susceptible to shudders: various close-ups see implements being stabbed into what looks suspiciously like a side of pork...

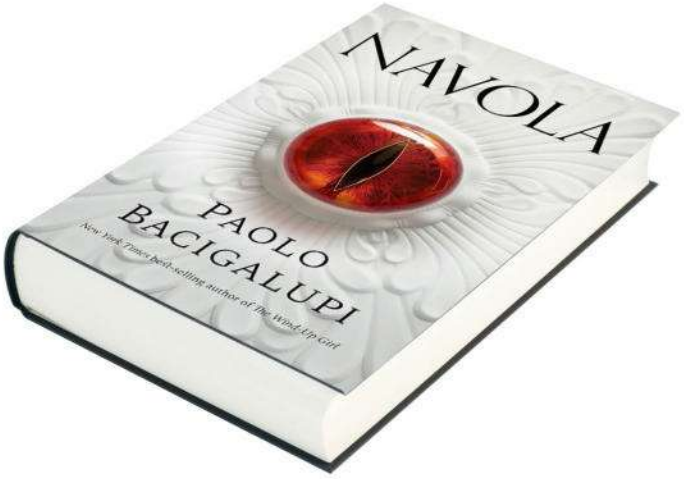
Extras Choose the Italian cut or the English version (five minutes longer). The latter has two chatty critical commentaries. Luigi Montefiori is amusingly frank in a 2023 interview (27 minutes), saying he only wrote such "idiotic films" for the money. In a second (14 minutes) he calls *Absurd* "Nothing to write home about"!

This dates from 2016, as do chats with the composer (18 minutes) and Michele Soavi (17 minutes) – who got his start here playing a biker. All three quickly move on to talk other credits, but it's still interesting to contrast Soavi's views on Joe D'Amato ("Close to a genius") with Montefiori's (er, less flattering...) A "visual essay" (14 minutes) wryly skewers the film's absurdities. Plus: trailer. **Ian Berriman**

i Released in Italy as *Rosso Sangue*, the film also garnered the alternate titles *Monster Hunter*, *Horrible* and *Zombie 6*.

ROUND UP

Busy month, so we'll stick to the highlights. In **ALL OF US STRANGERS** (17 June, Blu-ray/DVD) a writer (Andrew Scott) visits his childhood home, only to find his dead parents impossibly living there still, unaged. We said: "Moving, soulful and erotically charged... Like all good ghost stories, has spine-tingling surprises in store." Bonuses? Two featurettes (six minutes each). Denis Villeneuve returns to Arrakis in **DUNE: PART TWO** (out now, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), which sees Paul Atreides learning the ways of the Fremen so he can lead them into battle as their messiah. We said: "A landmark achievement... If David Lean had made a sci-fi film, it'd probably have looked something like this." Extras: about an hour's worth of behind-the-scenes featurettes. Another eight bonuses are digital exclusives. Boo! Written by *Juno*'s Diablo Cody, the '80s-set **LISA FRANKENSTEIN** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) sees a goth outcast taking in a young Victorian man whose corpse was revived by a lightning strike. Dismemberment ensues. We said: "The production design is where it excels... But many of the jokes are about as funny as a funeral." Extras include director's commentary, three featurettes, and deleted scenes. Finally, a lonely dog buys a pet robot in **ROBOT DREAMS** (17 June, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD)... only for his new pal to rust up on a trip to the beach. Oh no! Oscar-nominated for Best Animated Feature, the film also got five stars from our reviewer, who called it "charming". Extras include a director interview from podcast *Ghibliotheque*.



NAVOLA

A dangerous inheritance

SFX Loves

★★★★★

RELEASED 4 JULY
576 pages | Hardback/ebook
Author **Paolo Bacigalupi**
Publisher **Head Of Zeus**

There are times when writers reach a creative impasse. As he outlines in his interview with *SFX* this issue, this was a situation encountered by Paolo Bacigalupi. Having first made his name in 2009 with the extraordinary (and extraordinarily successful) biopunk thriller *The Windup Girl*, he arrived at a point where he suspected that his own work, so often fuelled by anxiety over environmental concerns, was echoing the fears of the moment rather than nudging conversations in any useful direction.

Trying to find a new way forward, Bacigalupi began to write not for publication but for his own pleasure, trying out new ideas and approaches. Thus *Navola*, a fantasy novel set in a milieu just off to one side of Renaissance-era Florence, in all its bloody and treacherous glory, was born.

The book's unusual and even troubled genesis arguably shows in its form. Where many modern fantasy novels are tightly written and edited so that, beyond some necessary world-building to set the atmosphere, the main narrative thrust is always front and central, *Navola* is by contrast languid and deliberately discursive. This is a book it's easy to imagine luxuriating in while sitting in the shade to escape the baking heat of a Tuscan afternoon.

Which doesn't mean that nothing happens. Far from it. Though it takes a while for *Navola*'s story to come into focus, there's plenty going on, most of it centred on young Davico di Regulai. A privileged child and the heir of a prominent banker, he's being groomed to take over the family business.

His birthright is a role that requires a rare combination of guile, political astuteness, financial acumen and, especially when dealing with arrogant noble families who resent the di Regulais' relatively recent ascent from obscurity, the ability to be simultaneously charming and ruthless; to smile while metaphorically wielding a dagger.

But there's a problem. Davico, at least when we first meet him, doesn't possess these qualities. Oh, he shows flashes of insight and even self-awareness, but he's a dreamy boy who rebels against his father Devonaci's machinations. This ultimately only has the effect of making Davico easier for Devonaci, whose grip on his business empire is perhaps not as great as he wants the world to believe, to manipulate.

There are further complications. In Devonaci's office is an orb that's said to be the eye of a long-dead dragon. It's a rare and fine object Devonaci displays as a way to demonstrate his influence and wealth. But is it really as inert as it appears? Or does it contain vestiges of power?

That's certainly how it seems to Davico and also to Celia, the precocious daughter of a nobleman adopted into the di Regulai family – or held hostage, depending on how you look at the situation.

Some of what follows, you will probably see coming. Davico is too often unequal to what's being asked of him to expect that he will

> **"A fantasy novel that you didn't know you wanted to read"**

get through life unscathed. His flashes of spoilt petulance don't help either. As for his fascination with his beautiful sister, this too is hardly likely to end well.

And yet when crisis arrives – or a first crisis, since there will be at least one more volume in this sequence – Bacigalupi beautifully shifts the narrative in a new direction, an exercise in misdirection that would surely impress even Devonaci di Regula.

None of this is to say *Navola* is perfect. (Could Davico really be *that* naive?) But this doesn't matter. The world is full of beautifully crafted fantasy novels that offer the things you might want from a fantasy novel – adventure, romance, magic. The triumph of *Navola* is that so often it's genuinely innovative, a fantasy novel that you didn't know you wanted to read.

Jonathan Wright

i In real-life Florence, the Medici banking dynasty rose from relative obscurity to become, effectively, the city's rulers.

SFX Loves

THE SAINT OF BRIGHT DOORS

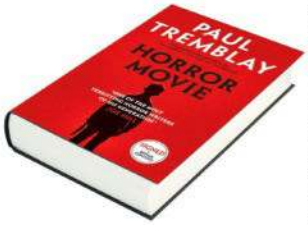
★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Vajra Chandrasekera**
Publisher **Solaris**

First published in the US last year, this science-fantasy tale of gods and revolution has been scooping up all the plaudits. At the time of writing, it's won the Crawford award for best fantasy debut, and is shortlisted for prizes from both writers (the Nebula) and readers (the Hugo).

Fetter is a Chosen One. Or rather, he was supposed to be, but got rejected by his messianic father. Now he's scraping a living in the vibrant and turbulent city of Luriat. In theory, he's been honed by vengeful maternal training into a weapon directed against his holy deadbeat dad; in practice, he's got a boyfriend, joined a support group for un-chosen ones, and keeps quiet about his ability to fly. But in a city riven by pogroms against disfavoured castes, where refugees and radicals are regularly carted off to prison camps, not-flying under the radar is getting harder by the day.

It's a tricky novel to categorise: part-superhero origin story, part-postcolonial politics, part-Buddhist folklore, and all gloriously subversive weirdness. And while his protagonist juggles the contradictions of his identities, Vajra Chandrasekera plays with narrative structure: backstory is invariably supplied by unreliable narrators, and one character can literally rewrite time. Bold, compulsive, dazzling writing. **Nic Clarke**



HORROR MOVIE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 11 JUNE
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/
Author **Stuart Turton**
Publisher **Raven Books**

Can you reboot a movie that technically never existed in the first place? Three decades after a low-budget indie movie shoot ends in tragedy, Hollywood comes calling: a hot young director wants to use the recently leaked screenplay to finally let people see *Horror Movie*, and she wants the film's only surviving cast member to resume his role. But calling the nameless Thin Kid out of the shadows threatens to unleash something truly monstrous...

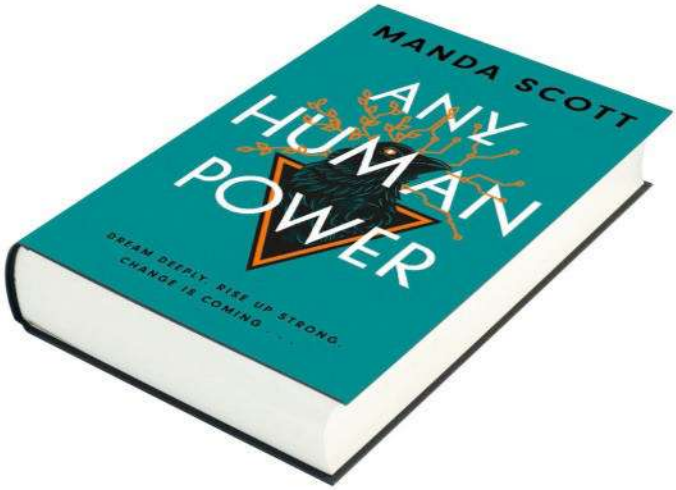
The back-and-forth narrative, which also incorporates sections from the film's screenplay, makes for an engaging mystery, with more than one nasty surprise along the way. And Paul Tremblay clearly knows his way around horror fandom; the scenes set at a convention have a particularly uncomfortable verisimilitude.

But the story is told from the perspective of its least interesting character, and the themes all feel a little too familiar (not least because Tremblay explored similar ground in his 2015 novel *A Head Full Of Ghosts*).

There's an emotional distance to the storytelling that also fails to hide its construction; it's as if you can see the scaffolds carefully holding everything in place until it's eventually time to knock it all down.

Tremblay's never written a bad book yet, so this is still pretty good, but it's some way from being his best.

Sarah Dobbs



ANY HUMAN POWER

Towards a better future

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
512 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Manda Scott**
Publisher **September Publishing**

Manda Scott no longer thinks it's enough to describe the world's problems. In her mind, things are so dire that we need what she calls thrutopias, fictions that offer routes to a better world – and get us there quickly.

The title of this ambitious but flawed thriller, largely set in 2023 as a way to emphasise the urgency needed (do it yesterday!), is a reference to a speech by Ursula K Le Guin, in which the most august of SFF's grand dames reminded us that, "Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings."

Or those who have become post-human, because Scott's central character dies at the end of the first chapter. Lan, a grandmother, makes a vow that links her to the living, and in particular her extended family. As she watches over her descendants and those they love, a crisis is looming.

It arrives when Lan's teenage granddaughter, Kaitlyn, posts about how too much sexual content online is "of young girls being violently assaulted", because this is the material that appeals to all too many old men who have the cash to pay for such content.

As Kaitlyn's words trend, she finds herself at the centre of a media storm, and her family is plunged into crisis. It's a personal crisis that presages a wider crisis – and, ultimately, change at a global level.

In ushering in this change, Lan emerges as a central figure because she can, from her post-corporeal perspective, see a timeline where humanity saves itself by acting as if it's facing an existential crisis rather than pursuing business as usual.

Whether Scott's route out of trouble is entirely convincing is another matter. So much of the action here takes place online that you may find yourself reflecting on how revolutions often quickly get *visceral* in the real world.

Then again, it's indisputable that the novel poses a blunt and worrying question: if you can't agree with this, what will *you* do instead?

Jonathan Wright

i A huge fan of *Elite* on the BBC Micro, Scott spent three years working for co-creator David Braben's videogame company.

THE STARS TOO FONDLY

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Emily Hamilton**
Publisher **Gollancz**

Twenty years ago, the crew of the Providence disappeared the moment their experimental dark matter engine was engaged. They were supposed to head to the stars to settle on an exoplanet – furthering the future of the human race.

Enticed by this enduring mystery, a group of friends climb aboard the now-abandoned ship to have a poke around. Before they can say "Whoops!", the engine suddenly fires up and they're shot into space, doomed to recreate that initial journey.

Their only guide is the ship's hologram, Billie, recreated from the profile of the first crew's captain. Which is awkward, because reluctant new crewmember Cleo is kind of in love with her...

Thus the stage is set for a double-pronged thriller/romance: what the heck happened to the first crew, and how can Cleo and her pals survive years in space – or, in Cleo and Billie's case, actually touching each other?

Emily Hamilton's writing is pleasingly snappy; her characters spout pop-culture quips and freak out convincingly, and the drip-drip of clues builds to a satisfying climax. Just one criticism: the constant switching of POVs and formatting in the final act gets a little messy. It's a small issue, though, in an otherwise fun debut. **Jayne Nelson**

RUNNING CLOSE TO THE WIND

★★★★☆

RELEASED 13 JUNE

435 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Alexandra Rowland**

Publisher **Tor**

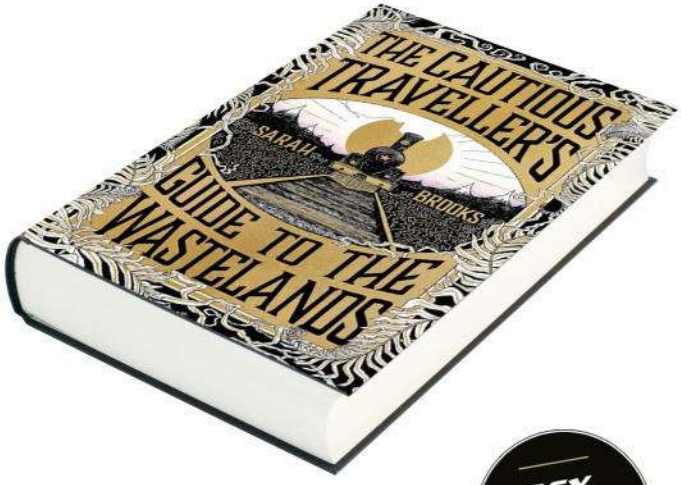
If the cancellation of *Our Flag Means Death* has left you mourning for your queer pirate adventures fix, then step right this way – *Running Close To The Wind* has female pirates, gay pirates, non-binary pirates and more.

It's also got sea serpents and a *very* horny main character. Seriously, if you're not a fan of sex fantasies or penis references, then you might as well move on. They are such fun though.

It's the story of Avra Helvaçi, a former intelligence agent who has stolen the world's most valuable secret: the method that the Arashti use to keep their ships safe from serpents. Terrified for his life, he has offered to share the treasure with the crew of The Running Sun, captained by the object of Avra's eternal desire, Teveri. He's joined by the celibate – but stunningly attractive – monk Julian, who may just be able to make the formula work. But first there's a cake competition to attend...

This is an incredibly horny book that is also silly and loving and wants to celebrate just how *fun* sexiness can be. Avra's lustful babbling can be exhausting to read at first, but you'll soon get swept up in an exuberant adventure that manages to combine humour with a strong sense of humanity and justice.

Rhian Drinkwater



THE CAUTIOUS TRAVELLER'S GUIDE TO THE WASTELANDS

SFX Loves

Strangeness On A Train

★★★★★

RELEASED 20 JUNE

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Sarah Brooks**

Publisher **Weidenfeld & Nicholson**

As Agatha Christie taught us, long-distance trains make a great setting for stories. They're hotels on rails, full of strangers with secrets: a cross-section of the social classes cooped up together in a metal tube steaming across a continent.

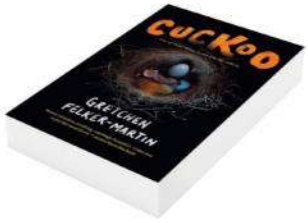
Sarah Brooks's debut takes place in the late nineteenth century, and centres on a journey via the Great Trans-Siberian Express, from Moscow to Beijing. It's a transit through an uncanny landscape – echoing Area X in Jeff VanderMeer's Southern Reach trilogy or the Zone in the Strugatsky brothers' *Roadside Picnic* – that passengers are warned not to spend too long gazing at. But it's *totally* fine, the Trans-Siberia Company assures everyone; the reinforced walls and windows of the train are *ample* protection against the Wastelands. Just ignore those silly rumours about what happened on the previous trip!

The engaging cast of characters spans the length of the train, from the gentry and silk merchants boozing it up in the First Class dining car to the ordinary folk huddled on their bunks in Third, plus the harried stewards, stokers and navigators shuttling between them all.

Brooks's crisp style and striking visual imagination make the Wastelands a hypnotic blend of menace and beauty, and she builds tension with a light touch. The more closely the characters look, the more there is to see. And the more we learn about the weirdness and its causes, the more perfectly it fits this setting of science, industry and empire.

Nic Clarke

i The book began as a story written at a writers' workshop in 2012, during George RR Martin's week as the tutor.



CUCKOO

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

352 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Gretchen Felker-Martin**

Publisher **Titan Books**

A group of teens battle both human and cosmic evil in *Cuckoo*, a viscerally-felt horror novel with more than a hint of classic Stephen King.

It's the summer of 1995. Following a terrific prologue, which almost feels like a terrifying self-contained short story, we jump ahead a few years to the kidnapping of a disparate group of teenagers with one thing in common: they're all members of the LGBTQ+ community who have been betrayed by their families. One by one they find themselves transported to the remote Camp Resolution, a brutal conversion facility deep in the scorching desert which holds a very strange secret...

Despite its period setting, *Cuckoo*'s focus on the bigotry routinely faced by marginalised people everywhere feels horribly relevant to our present moment, and the kids' panic and desperation is very effectively conveyed. At the same time, this is a novel not a lecture.

We mentioned Stephen King at the top and, with its third act time-jump, the book can't help but bring *It* to mind. More pertinently, however, Felker-Martin shares King's desire to tell a gripping yarn above all else. At times that's a weakness – there are a lot of characters here, and not all of them feel fully developed – but it's also a strength. At its best, *Cuckoo* is fast, bloody, and full of both empathy and rage.

Will Salmon

THE LOVE INTEREST

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

416 pages | Paperback/ebook

Author **Helen Comerford**

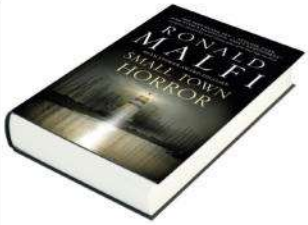
Publisher **Bloomsbury**

When *The Boys* not only exists but airs to huge viewing figures, you may find yourself wondering why we need a book about how joining a society of celebrity superheroes is a bad idea. But then you remember just how rude *The Boys* is; it's nice to know that younger folk can read *The Love Interest* without being subjected to exploding penises.

Helen Comerford's debut is a cheerful adventure in which teenager Jenna Ray is rescued from a fire by a brand new superhero named Blaze. Their world is like ours except that superheroes and villains exist, with all sorts of mutant animals and weird natural disasters.

As Jennna is the first person resuced by Blaze, the public and media are convinced that she is now his Love Interest: yes, women are still seen this way in this Britain. She isn't interested, however. Until she comes to realise that there's something going on behind the scenes at Blaze's superhero HQ...

There are a few miscalculations here – characters say "feck" *far* too much, for starters – but it's churlish to complain about such things with a book so determined to be a wholesome, energetic romp. Jenna's a perfect narrator, and some moments, such as soldiers being attacked by killer squirrels, are laugh-out-loud funny. Derivative, yes, but fecking good fun. **Jayne Nelson**



SMALL TOWN HORROR

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Ronald Malfi**

Publisher **Titan Books**

What if the worst thing you ever did as a teenager came back to haunt you? For most of us, it probably wouldn't be that big a deal. But for happily married lawyer Andrew Larimer...? That thing might be about to blow up his entire life, courtesy of a spooky phone call from a long-lost friend whose wife has gone missing...

Many of the twists and turns in Ronald Malfi's aptly (if unimaginatively) named small town horror novel are pretty predictable. After all, vengeful ghosts do tend to have similar motivations, and Andrew's friends all seem to have grown up into stock characters (the cop who abuses his power, the struggling single mother, the desperate drug addict), which means that the whole book feels familiar. You've read something just like this before.

It's not badly done. The prose is just descriptive enough that the sights and (especially) smells of the horror are easy to imagine; the stakes are high; and while he's not exactly likeable, Andrew is just enough of a believable character that you want him to triumph. (That teenage thing was not really his fault enough that you can mostly forgive him.)

But nothing here lingers, and none of it is quite frightening or original enough that you'd recommend the book to a pal. Maybe that uninspired title says it all. **Sarah Dobbs**

EVOCATION

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

277 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **ST Gibson**

Publisher **Angry Robot**

Billed as "urban fantasy romance", this tale of sorcerers, mediums and demons in Boston is the first in a new series by bestselling author ST Gibson – and though there's plenty of fantasy, it's really the romance that's the star.

Professional medium and high-powered lawyer David Aristarkov is performing a standard communion with a client's dead husband when he is shaken by a psychic attack from an unknown demon.

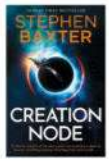
Unsure where to turn, he contacts his ex-boyfriend Rhys, who along with Rhys's wife Moira becomes increasingly drawn into the mystery of just what demonic fate is coming for David. As per family legend, it appears his ancestor made a deal with the Devil, and David's soul is set to be the price.

The characters are well drawn – though David has more than a few hints of Patrick Bateman with his glossy condo and health regime – but as they're mostly seen from the viewpoints of people who love them, they often come across as a little too perfect.

The fantasy world of a secret society of sorcerers, of tarot and chaos magic, feels real and whole. Magic and demons, though, are very much a (too slight) B-plot to the intense feelings and developing relationships between the three main characters, as they work through layers of jealousy and history. A queer love story with heart. **Rhian Drinkwater**

REISSUES

Our paperback picks kick off with **THE KINDNESS** (★★★★½, out now, riverrun) by John Ajvide Lindqvist, best known for *Let The Right One In*. Set in a Swedish port town, it centres on a shipping container, mysteriously dumped overnight, which turns out to hold the remains of 28 refugees – and seems to contaminate the locals with a metaphysical illness. We said: "Explores themes about trauma, displaced people, and the lure of the Far Right... The depth of the characters and their relationships makes it a thoroughly compelling experience." In **PROPHET** (★★★★☆, 20 June, Vintage) co-written by Helen MacDonald and Sin Blaché, a pair of agents are dispatched to investigate the mysterious materialisation of an American diner in a field in England, uncovering a phenomena that turns nostalgia into a deadly weapon. We said: "Both a moody genre story and the tale of a messy romance between its protagonists... These aspects don't always play well together, but there's no denying the strength of the prose, and the book's timely themes." Finally, in Stephen Baxter's **CREATION NODE** (★★★★☆, 20 June, Gollancz) a young spacefarer encounters a kind of "primordial black hole" – and acquires a new best friend, a birdlike alien nicknamed Feathers; other plot elements include the appearance of a quasar which is heating up the solar system, and a god-like intelligence called Terminus. We said: "Perhaps his most ambitious novel for years."



THE LEGEND OF MAD MAX

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
192 pages | Hardback
Author **Ian Nathan**
Publisher **Palazzo Editions**

From micro-budget cult carnage met with moral outrage to a Best Director Oscar nomination, the *Mad Max* films have come a long way while changing very little. Well, okay, *Beyond Thunderdome* tried experimenting, but that was the exception that proved the rule. Otherwise, the *Mad Max* saga is the tale of one man, director George Miller, sticking to a vision: cinematic action as visual poetry and the natural evolution from silent comedy as the purest form of big-screen storytelling.

This glossy coffee book captures that tale beautifully, while actually offering little new: there are no original interviews here and no rare images, just a pacy, entertaining biography of a franchise, written by somebody who clearly knows their film history and effortlessly places everything in context. The prose is punchy, well-researched and fun, providing insight and analysis.

It works brilliantly as a potted history of all the major highs and lows of the franchise, a proper celebration of why it should be regarded as a cinematic titan. However, it also only feels like an introduction to the subject, fact-packed but only skimming the surface, with page after page of photo library-sourced publicity pics that feel very familiar. Still, for a cash-in book it's pretty decent. **Dave Golder**

DAUGHTER OF CALAMITY

★★☆☆☆

RELEASED 18 JUNE
352 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Rosalie M Lin**
Publisher **Tor Books**

Lots of kids grow up feeling the pressure to get into the family business. But most don't involve sewing new magical silver arms onto gangsters...

Cabaret dancer Jingwen has a complicated relationship with both her mother and her grandmother: her mum's dating a Shanghai policeman, while her grandmother provides mystical medicine for the criminal underworld. Her moral compass gets another good spin when she discovers that one of her wealthy clients is trying to use shamanistic magic to take over the city.

This is Rosalie M Lin's debut novel, and unfortunately it feels like it. For at least half the book, the prose is so overwritten that it's hard to follow what's meant to be happening: there's about one sentence of action per page, while some sentences bow under the weight of three different similes. Occasionally she hits on something truly evocative; usually metaphors evaporate into nonsense.

In later chapters, things are less laboured, and some of the fantasy horror (girls with missing faces stalking the streets, giant locusts eating men alive) gains some urgency. Much-needed development for supporting characters also makes things more interesting, but getting there requires far more patience than any fantasy this lightweight should ask for from its readers. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE KNIFE AND THE SERPENT

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!
400 pages | Paperback/ebook
Author **Tim Pratt**
Publisher **Angry Robot**

All Glen Browning is hoping to find on a dating site is someone to have kinky sex with. Instead he unwittingly hooks up with a pansexual, multiverse-hopping spy called Vivy, who only slowly reveals all her secrets to him – usually only when she's forced to. And the revelations only accelerate when Vivy is assigned a mission in our dimension which involves one of Glen's exes.

The Knife And The Serpent is short, silly and fuelled with a subversive sexual energy. It's also a thinly disguised series of infodumps organised into the most perfunctory narrative possible, that feels less like a complete, fully-rounded novel, and more like the world-building pilot episode of a teen-targeted sci-fantasy series for Netflix.

There's not much in the way of original ideas, either; it's more of a pick 'n' mix bag of voguish sci-fi buzz concepts that has split open and spilled its contents in the fetish toolbox (or maybe toybox).

The colourful characters are fun to spend time with, but very broad. Don't expect much emotional nuance beyond mild irritation at heteronormative sex. And the character arc for the main villain has all the subtlety of a '30s comic book bad guy origin story.

A deeply, deeply flawed novel then, but one that's not without its own, weird, deranged, pulpy allure. **Dave Golder**

ALSO OUT

There's plenty more books we couldn't fit in. Set in South Korea in 1992, Sophie Kim's romantic fantasy **THE GOD AND THE GUMIHO** (out now, Hodder) sees a fallen trickster god teaming up with a shapeshifting fox to track down a demon of darkness that's escaped the underworld. Lottie Mils's debut collection **MONSTRUM** (out now, Oneworld) collects short stories described as "neo-gothic modern fairytales", which (it says here) "capture the experience of characters excluded by a society that cannot accept their difference". One of those books that gets described as a "TikTok sensation" (and thereby makes us feel 1,000 years old), Sarah A Parker's **WHEN THE MOON HATCHED** (13 June, HarperVoyager) is a fantasy romance centring on an assassin imprisoned by powerful fae, and a dragon rider crushed by the loss of his great love. We predict smoochies. The latest *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novel, **PLIABLE TRUTHS** (out now, Pocket Books) sees Picard visiting Terok Nor (soon to be Deep Space Nine) to assist with talks on ending the Cardassian occupation of Bajor – and being faced with an incident which could reignite hostilities. After *Lancelot* and *Camelot*, Giles Kristian's Arthurian trilogy concludes with **ARTHUR** (out now, Transworld). He was in '90s boy band Upside Down, you know. Giles Kristian that is, not Arthur. Finally, **THE ART OF GODZILLA X KONG: THE NEW EMPIRE** (out now, Titan) combines concept art for/crew interviews about the movie that gave Big G a pink-spined make-over.

THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Paul Tremblay

The horror author loves his Godzilllas – and his Swans

What is your daily writing routine like?
Squeezing in one-two hours of writing time at night during the work week, and then a little longer on weekend mornings and during school vacations.

Describe the room in which you typically write.
It's a little dining room that I took over and made into my "office". I have a desk crammed with horror knick-knacks, and the walls are sporadically decorated with posters.

What kind of mementos or knick-knacks do you have within reach?
Various bits and bobs related to *Jaws*. A Lament Configuration box signed by Clive Barker. A one-off Johnny Smith (*The Dead Zone*) figure from [Etsy site] Readful Things. My most recent acquisitions (yeah, let's call them that) are three Godzillas.

Do you find it helpful to listen to music while writing?
I prefer silence generally, but because there are no doors to my writing area, I often write with music playing to drown out the house sounds. My go-tos are movie soundtracks, the band Swans, and a collection of Béla Bartók pieces.

How do you deal with writers' block/procrastination?
To fight the procrastination urge, I'll schedule/force myself to sit for an hour. Stephen Graham Jones has the best attitude toward writer's block. He says there's no such thing. It's only that your standards are too high.

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?
The next one. But also, *No Sleep Till Wonderland*, my follow up to *The Little Sleep*. I didn't want to write it, but I was contractually obligated to do so. It took a long time for me to stop whining to myself that I'd already written detective Mark Genevich's story.

Have you ever come up with a good plot idea in a dream?
No. Never. I wish my dreams/nightmares would help me out like that instead of terrifying me.

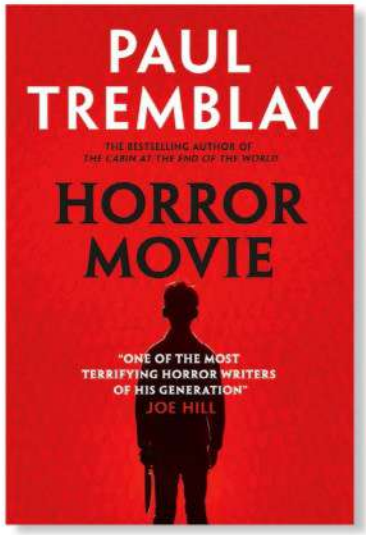
What would be your desert island book?
House Of Leaves by Mark Danielewski.

Is there any particular author whose writing ability makes you envious?
Mariana Enriquez because of her vision and intellect. Patrick de Witt for the driest wit (no pun intended). Also, Benjamin Labatut because he writes mathematics-infused cosmic horror non-fiction that is truly terrifying.

Recommend one book that you love, but that's not very well known generally.
Lucius Shepard's *Handbook Of American Prayer*. It's so well-written and sad and funny and prophetic. Also, I just discovered *Mrs Caliban* by Rachel Ingalls and it's such a wonderfully strange, discomfiting book.

Mariana Enriquez, pictured in 2017.

AWAKENING/GETTY


PAUL TREMBLAY
THE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE CABIN AT THE END OF THE WORLD
HORROR MOVIE
"ONE OF THE MOST TERRIFYING HORROR WRITERS OF HIS GENERATION"
JOE HILL

What's the most frustrating thing about being an author?
The amount of noise thrust at us via social media.

Got any good pieces of writing advice that you can pass on?
I'll give you two. Write your obsessions. And learn to trust and reward your subconscious. If it brings you an idea, acknowledge and mess around with it. If you do so, your subconscious will keep bringing you shiny things to play with.

Paul Tremblay's new novel Horror Movie is out now, published by Titan Books.

THE BAT-MAN: FIRST KNIGHT

Bat to basics

★★½☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC/Black Label**
Writer **Dan Jurgens**
Artist **Mike Perkins**

ISSUES 1-3 **One superhero** subgenre that's cropping up more and more in mainstream comics could be described as historical realism: portraying colourful vintage superheroes alongside the genuine politics and historical events happening when they were first published. The best example of this is *The New Frontier* by writer/artist Darwyn Cooke, but other superhero comics over the years have used this approach with characters like Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four.

It's a surprise it's taken this long for Batman to enter the mix, but he does so in DC's latest Black Label "prestige format" miniseries. *The Bat-Man: First Knight* is a three-issue tale that takes on the realities of American life in 1939 (including homelessness, anti-semitism and the rise of Nazism), but also delves into Batman's pulp crime roots with a level of realism and violence that 1939-era comics simply couldn't.

The first of a planned series for "the Bat-Man", *First Knight*'s plot is full of traditional Batman tropes, following Bruce Wayne in his first weeks as a costumed vigilante as he battles a corrupt conspiracy that's transforming executed criminals into monstrous beast-men. What's most distinctive about it are the changes: the tone is much more adult, closer to the hard-boiled crime fiction of Dashiel Hammett and Raymond Chandler.

There's also no Alfred and no Bat-Cave, while the Bat-Man has to have tentative agreements with certain criminals in order to get the information he needs to solve crimes.

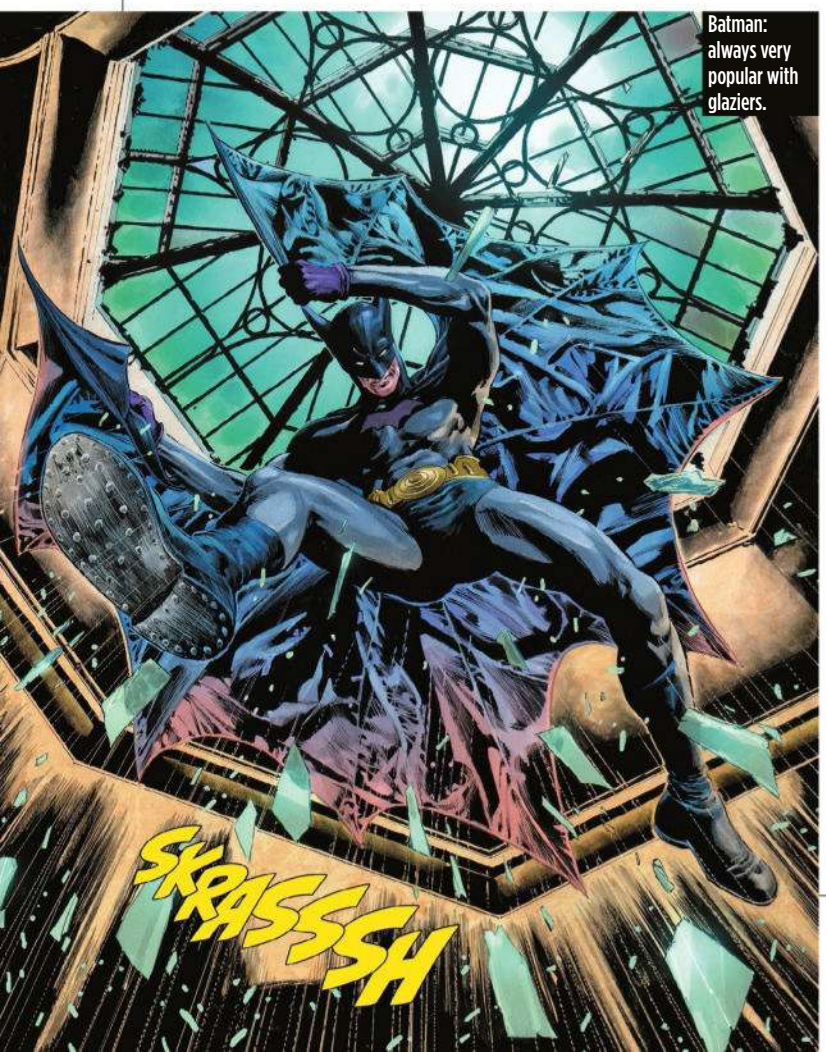
There's a lot of promising territory to explore here, but the result is a messy mix of crime thriller and superhero adventure that never quite achieves the right balance between realistic grit and lurid pulp craziness.

What this project needed was a comic writer with experience writing crime stories (the best current example being Ed Brubaker). Instead, we get DC veteran Dan Jurgens, who feels out of his depth here. His script has a good sense of pace and pulls off some effective set-pieces, but the tone is uneven, and the hard-boiled dialogue drifts too many times into awkward clunkiness.

> "Takes on the realities of American life in 1939"

There's no problem with the visuals, with artist Mike Perkins utilising the oversized page format to the maximum, conjuring up a realistic and well-researched version of 1939 Gotham that we've never seen before. It's just a pity that the script can't quite match his work, trying too hard to be gritty and adult, and leaving this first adventure for the Bat-Man falling a long way short of its potential impact. **Saxon Bullock**

i One of the main character inspirations for this version of Bruce Wayne was American inventor Thomas Edison.



Batman: always very popular with glaziers.

THE LAST MERMAID

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Image Comics**
Writer/artist **Derek Kirk Kim**

ISSUES 1-3 **Ever looked at *The Little Mermaid*** and thought "What this needs is more mecha suits"? The latest ongoing title from Image is here to solve the problem with a visually impressive post-apocalyptic saga.

It's the story of a lone mermaid in a devastated world, where the only thing keeping her alive is a hulking, water-filled environment suit. She's on a quest to find potential shelter, but the desert she's travelling across is harsh, and the suit may not last much longer.

Three issues in, this is a compelling, well-crafted series with a nifty line in ticking-clock suspense and a strong emphasis on the visuals (especially thanks to the unusual, wider page format). Writer/artist Derek Kirk Kim is keeping plenty of secrets back in terms of the overall story, but this is also largely a survival adventure thriller, regularly pitching the titular mermaid against a variety of external threats.

The fully-painted art varies between expressive manga-influenced characterisation and grotesque monster design, while also delivering an epic sense of scale in the action sequences. The pacing is occasionally a little haphazard – it feels like this will make for a smoother read in the eventual collected edition – but otherwise this intriguing and distinctive adventure is off to a promising start.

Saxon Bullock

GONE

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DSTLRY**
Writer/artist **Jock**

ISSUES 1-3 **Like the comic book** equivalent of IMAX, DSTLRY's oversized, double-length format places the emphasis firmly on the artwork, and you can almost feel the sheer depth of outer space in the numerous single and double-page spreads that Jock generously awards himself over the course of this three-issue series. *Gone*'s strength lies in Jock's visceral cartooning, which is further enhanced by his and Lee Loughridge's evocative colours.

The story is more character- than plot-driven. Combining the dystopian social commentary of *Halo Jones* with the grittier *Star Wars* of *Rogue One* and *Andor*, it centres on Abi, a young girl from a backwater planet who sneaks onboard a luxury starliner in search of food – only to find herself stranded upon it after it embarks upon a decades-long voyage.

Incorporating some substantial time jumps and inevitable plot twists involving Abi's long-lost father, Jock doesn't give you much chance to get to know the crew and passengers before they're caught up in bloody battles between the Machiavellian Captain and insurgent group the Sabs. It's rewarding to witness Abi growing over the course of these three issues from a precocious teenager to a battle-scarred young adult whose actions would do Rey herself proud. Sadly, the poignant conclusion suggests that there isn't much prospect of a sequel. **Stephen Jewell**

ULTIMATE X-MEN

SFX Loves

A Peach of an X-book

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Marvel Comics**
Writer/artist **Peach Momoko**

ISSUES 1-3 **Have you ever tried to** get into X-Men comics but picked the wrong one and been baffled by the millions of characters and multiple ongoing plotlines? If so, then *Ultimate X-Men* is for you.

Written and painted by rising star Peach Momoko, this new ongoing series is an X-Men comic like no other. There are no battling teams of mutants here (hell, the "m" word isn't even muttered until three issues in) and big name characters like Storm and Wolverine are notable by their absence. Instead, the series follows two young girls.

Hisako is a loner, haunted by the death of her friend Tsubasa. Mei is more extroverted, but carrying her own troubled past. When a ghostly figure starts killing the students and teachers who bullied Tsubasa, the duo set out to investigate. The story is small-scale and personal, rather than epic, and the tone is closer to the everyday eldritch of Junji Ito's horror manga than, say, the work of Chris Claremont or Grant Morrison.

> **"This new ongoing series is an X-Men comic like no other"**

Best of all is Momoko's gorgeous art. Her watercolour pages are steeped in atmosphere, evoking a believable world of green fields and grey tower blocks that thrums with a sense of supernatural forces at work beneath the surface.

The *Ultimates* line is meant to reimagine Marvel's biggest characters outside of the mainstream continuity. In practice that has sometimes manifested as books that are overly fannish. *Ultimate X-Men*, however, feels like a genuinely fresh new vision, one that should appeal to everyone from veteran fans to kids picking up their first comic. Simply X-traordinary. **Will Salmon**

i In mainstream Marvel continuity Hisako is the hero known as Armor, created by Joss Whedon and John Cassaday.

... OR PERHAPS IT WAS BECAUSE OF THE MAGIC HERBS THAT I PUT INTO THE PIE – HERBS THAT ROB YOU OF YOUR STRENGTH...
SHE IS A WITCH! AND I'VE FALLEN INTO HER TRAP!

KELPIE THE BOY WIZARD

★★★★☆

RELEASED **19 JUNE**
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writer **Ken Mennell**
Artist **John Burns**

COLLECTION **Celebrating 60** years since these Arthurian adventures first appeared in the pages of *Wham!*, Rebellion's latest reprint collection also honours artist John Burns, who passed away late last year.

One of the true masters of British comics, Burns's elegant but dynamic style suits this storybook vision of Camelot, where castles shine, dragons prowl the land and wizards rock conical hats decorated with stars. Kelpie is Merlin's young, towheaded apprentice and makes for an endearingly flawed hero, botching sorcerous experiments and muddling spells while stepping up to face such villains as the Black Raven, Badarach the witch and throne-lusting tyrant Tygron.

There's an awful lot of shape-shifting into animals – the name Kelpie itself is a clue in that regard, though he's no Scottish water spirit – and while that can feel like more of a storytelling crutch than a legitimate superpower, Burns's gorgeous black-and-white art keeps the pages turning. His classical draughtsmanship unleashes a whole bestiary of creatures, from black boars to pterodactyls and a seven-headed monster that's pure Ray Harryhausen.

Bonus material includes an interview with Burns himself, a fascinating history of Odhams Press, and tributes from comic pros to a man acknowledged as one of the greats. **Nick Setchfield**

SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

SFX Loves

Grim transcendence

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Reviewed on **Xbox Series X**

Publisher **Xbox Game Studios**

VIDEOGAME ***Senua's Saga:*** *Hellblade II* is the most important game you'll play this year.

Don't let its modest eight-hour runtime fool you; anyone who's played *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* knows that these aren't fun-loving morsels to snack on for mid-week kicks, but incisive videogame experiences that want to leave a scar. *Hellblade II* goes further still: it is fundamentally changing mental health representation in gaming, showing trauma not as the source of its bleak psychological horrors, but as a tool used to excavate them.

Doubling down on the already harrowing nature of its predecessor, *Hellblade II* sees its Pict warrior heroine Senua pursuing the Icelandic marauders who've pillaged and enslaved her people for years. She's shucked off the chains of shame to accept her psychosis – and the unique perspective it offers – as an intrinsic part of her being. But a journey that begins as a campaign of vengeance swiftly gives way to a much grander narrative puzzle, one that only Senua can solve.

Much as in *Hellblade*, you'll be piecing together environmental clues to progress through different locales and uncover their secrets. This time around, however, the thematic resonance of how and why Senua is able to do this is given a new lease of life. This is down to the staggering technological feats pulled off by developer Ninja Theory as it strives for true immersion. The revolving binaural chorus of Furies (the voices Senua hears in her head) is even more pronounced in *Hellblade II*, haunting you each step of the dimly-lit way and blurring the edges of reality. It's unrelenting, help and hindrance in equal measure; headphones are the best way to soak up the rich spatial textures carved out against its photorealistic backdrop.

The combat is sharper, the puzzles varied and refined to reflect broader themes, and the level design is in constant flux as you embark on a journey of internal discoveries marked by external chaos.

In short, *Hellblade II* feels like a crescendo. Senua's sacrifices have been leading up to this moment of catharsis, her greatest weakness finally leveraged as an even greater strength when wielded against the literal and psychological monsters she must face. **Jasmine Gould-Wilson**

i Melina Juergens, Senua's mocap actor, learnt MMA moves and swordfighting – despite suffering from fibromyalgia.

"Kids! Brush 'em at least twice a day. OR ELSE."

THE WORLDS OF BLAKE'S 7: TARRANT

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Running time **179 minutes**

Format **CD/download**

Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **The huge** advantage Big Finish has when it comes to Tarrant – the cocky space pilot from the last two TV seasons of *Blake's 7* – is how underwritten he was on screen, with a vague backstory full of contradictions. It's like Terry Nation created him with a Big Finish box set in mind.

This collection features three tales from various points in Tarrant's timeline: two before he joined the Liberator crew, and one set shortly after. BF has bought in its most reliable scribes to wrangle them: James Goss, Andy Lane and Gary Russell. Steven Pacey returns to play the Solo-inspired rogue, though he's the only original actor from the show to do so.

The first tale is almost an alternate history, using a clever conceit to address a bunch of continuity errors. It has some fun moments but is ploddingly episodic and feels a little like an academic exercise.

The second is an effectively tense, claustrophobic *Alien*-style SF horror on a vast, not-quite-empty space hulk. The final tale has Tarrant and a (recast) Dayna on a mission that pits them against a bunch of people who are all trying to betray each other.

They're serviceable enough fare, but largely come across more like canon-Polyfilla than stories that desperately needed to be told. **Dave Golder**

CROW COUNTRY

This crow flies

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewed on **PS5**
Also on **PC, PS4, Xbox Series S|X**
Publisher **SFB Games Limited**

VIDEOGAME **Love letters to** original PlayStation-era survival horror should be opened more cautiously than ticking parcels addressed using letters cut out from newspapers. Go back and try a 3D horror game from the late '90s and you'll usually find that they've aged about as well as acid wash jeans.

You'll have to endure horrible tank controls, laughably dated graphics and illogical backtracking-obsessed puzzles that seem to have been coded by developers recovering on the brain surgery ward. Frankly, some of the "classics" now belong in a gaming museum, firmly under lock and key.

Luckily, *Crow Country* knows this. It's a horror game that smartly updates and fixes the flaws of the retro titles it's riffing on. So you can enjoy smooth controls on the analogue sticks (or use the D-pad for tank controls – a brilliant touch), you don't have to worry about limited inventory slots, and you can even – gasp! – *move the camera*. Yet it still manages to conjure an atmosphere of dread and decay as you explore the titular theme park.

Crow Country has been closed down for several years, and is wonderfully grim. You play Mara Forest, an investigator searching for the park's missing owner, Edward Crow. In the process, you have to solve intuitive puzzles, shoot all sorts of horrible creatures, and slowly unravel the truth of what happened here.

> **"Updates and fixes the flaws of the retro titles it's riffing on"**

While not as scary as *Amnesia* or recent *Resident Evil* games, it's still packed with jump scares, has creepy vibes and is an utterly engrossing horror setting to explore. Visit Crow Country and you'll find a fun five-hour nightmare that respects the player's time and rewards you with a mystery that completely sticks the landing. **Abbie Stone**

There's no such thing as a friendly furnace.

i Keep an eye out in Tolman's office for an appearance by the same carpet pattern seen in *The Shining*'s Overlook Hotel.

KILLER KLOWNS FROM OUTER SPACE

Some big shoes to fill

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Reviewd on **PS5**
Also on **Xbox Series X|S, PC**
Publisher **Illfonic**

VIDEOGAME **The gloriously silly** 1988 horror movie, as anyone who's watched it can tell you, hurls plot and character development in the bin to make more room for fun. The game takes a similar approach; three klown players hunt seven human players, and that's all you really need to understand in order to get started.

The *why* of it all doesn't matter, because it's all about the *how*. When playing as a human, simply surviving until time runs out isn't enough. You need to find a way to escape the small town of Crescent Cove. The good news is, there are a few options; the bad news is, using them means locating items such as keys and spark plugs in order to open up the exits.

The human players start scattered across the map, and your experience on this team is an enjoyably tense one. You need to scavenge for weapons, throwables, healing items and exit items, all the while being careful to minimise the noisy act of running in case you attract the attention of any nearby klowns with their heightened senses. Meanwhile, as a klown your job is to find and kill those tasty humans, while hooking up candy floss cocoons to generators which spawn lackeys, who can help locate and attack your prey.

Klowning around is great fun, thanks to a surprising amount of inspiration taken directly from the movie: there's the candy floss gun to wrap up humans, a popcorn bazooka, a balloon dog to track any targets in range, and much more.

Mics truly bring the game to life via proximity chat. Humans can avoid nearby chatty klowns; equally, they might give away their positions – and those of others – while trying to warn or communicate with one another. Each match is an absolute circus (but in a good way). **Luke Kemp**

Are your klowns killer or krap? It's up to you.

i The fully-functional popcorn gun was the movie's most expensive prop, costing $7,000 and taking six weeks to build.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

THE DOCTORS

From Billy to Ncuti, how well do you know the actors behind the Time Lord?

Quizmaster **Nick Setchfield, Editor-at-large**

QUESTION 1
Which of his successors in the role did William Hartnell star alongside in the 1953 comedy *Will Any Gentleman...?*

QUESTION 2
Percy James Patrick Kent-Smith is the real name of which of the Doctors?

QUESTION 3
Which Doctor composed and sang the theme tune to kids' TV show *Button Moon*?

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Take a look at this photo of a pre-*Who* Tom Baker, and tell us the name of the movie.

QUESTION 5
Name the two Doctor actors who have also played members of the Beatles. (Clue: John Lennon and George Harrison, respectively.)

QUESTION 6
Which of the Doctors had to abandon a professional football career due to a back condition?

QUESTION 7
Colin Baker was the Sixth Doctor, but who did he play in Fifth Doctor story "Arc Of Infinity"?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Name this BBC TV show starring Peter Davison.

QUESTION 9
Which of the Doctors also played legendary outlaw Robin Hood on television?

QUESTION 10
What was the title of the 2011 *Black Mirror* episode that starred Jodie Whittaker?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
Name the crime-themed panel game that Jon Pertwee presented in the '70s.

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Name this David Tennant-starring TV series.

QUESTION 13
Which of Paul McGann's brothers also tested for the Eighth Doctor? a) Joe b) Stephen c) Mark.

QUESTION 14
Which Doctor has earned three BAFTA nominations for Best Male Comedy Performance?

QUESTION 15
Name the two actors to have played the Doctor who also appeared in *Blake's 7*.

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this '70s movie starring Patrick Troughton.

QUESTION 17
Which Doctor also played a Brigadier in *The Avengers* episode "From Venus With Love"?

QUESTION 18
Name the doomed crewman in *Alien* played by future War Doctor John Hurt.

QUESTION 19
Which of the Doctors wrote the 1999 children's book *The Boy Who Kicked Pigs*?

QUESTION 20
He was Doctor Who – but also a WHO Doctor in *World War Z*. Name him.

Answers
1 Jon Pertwee 2 Sylvester McCoy 3 Peter Davison 4 *The Golden Voyage Of Sinbad* 5 Christopher Eccleston (*Lennon Naked*) and Peter Capaldi (*John And Yoko: A Love Story*) 6 Matt Smith 7 Commander Maxil 8 *Campion* 9 Patrick Troughton 10 "The Entire History Of You" 11 *Whodunnit?* 12 *Casanova* 13 c) Mark 14 Ncuti Gatwa 15 Colin Baker and Richard Hurndall 16 *The Omen* 17 Jon Pertwee 18 Kane 19 Tom Baker 20 Peter Capaldi

How did you do?

Rate your IQ by gimmick

0-5
Yo-yo

6-10
Jelly baby

11-15
Recorder

16-19
Psychic paper

20
Brainy specs

PICTURES © MASHETER MOVIE ARCHIVE / ALAMY, BBC, LANDMARK MEDIA / ALAMY

SFX

JULY 2024 | Issue 380

Future PLC, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA

Editor
Darren Scott
darren.scott@futurenet.com

Deputy Editor
Ian Berriman
ian.berriman@futurenet.com

Art Editor
Jonathan Coates
jonathan.coates@futurenet.com

Production Editor
Ed Ricketts
ed.ricketts@futurenet.com

Editor-at-large
Nick Setchfield

US Editor
Tara Bennett

Contributors
Tom Arden, Simon Bland, Saxon Bullock, Nicola Clarke, Sarah Dobbs, Rhian Drinkwater, Dave Golder, Jasmine Gould-Wilson, Jamie Graham, Stephen Jewell, Luke Kemp, Leila Latif, Stuart Manning, James Mottram, Jayne Nelson, Steve O'Brien, Andrew Osmond, Will Salmon, Minyi Seo (design), Jack Shepherd, Neil Smith, Abbie Stone, James White, Jonathan Wright

Film Group, London
Editor Matt Maytum
Art Editor Andy McGregor
Deputy Editor Jordan Farley
Reviews Editor Matthew Leyland
News Editor Lauren Miles

Cover images
The Boys © Sony/Amazon MGM Studios

Stock elements: SENEZ, Sergey Ryumin, Getty

All copyrights and trademarks are recognised and respected

Printed in the UK by William Gibbons & Sons on behalf of Future.

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
marketforce.co.uk
For enquiries, please email: mfcommunications@futurenet.com

International Licensing/Syndication
SFX is available for licensing and syndication. To find out more contact us at licensing@futurenet.com or view our available content at futurecontenthub.com.

Advertising
Media packs available on request
Commercial Director Clare Dove
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Head of Commercial Jon Restall jon.restall@futurenet.com
Account Manager Rosie Liddington
rosie.liddington@futurenet.com

Subscriptions
New subscribers
magazinesdirect.com
Phone orders 0330 333 1113
Email help@magazinesdirect.com
Renewal mymagazine.co.uk
Customer service 0330 333 4333
Email help@mymagazine.co.uk
Lines are open Mon-Fri 8.30am-7pm and Sat 10am-3pm UK time.
Consumer Revenues Director Sharon Todd

Back Issues
Active subscribers have instant access to digital back issues through their iOS or Android device at no extra cost. For help, visit bit.ly/digiback. To purchase single print back issues, visit bit.ly/singleSFX.

Circulation
Newstrade Director Ben Oakden

Production
Head of Production Mark Constance
Production Project Manager Clare Scott
Advertising Production Manager Joanne Crosby
Digital Editions Controller Jason Hudson
Senior Production Manager Maaya Mistry

Management
SVP Consumer Kevin Addley
Managing Director, Games and Ents Matthew Pierce
Design Director Simon Maynard
Head of Art & Design Rodney Dive
Director of Group Finance Oli Foster

SFX (ISSN 1359-5959) July 2024, issue 380, is published monthly with an extra issue in December by Future Publishing, Quay House, The Ambury, Bath, BA1 1UA, UK.
Full subscription prices: £71.50 for UK, €158 for Europe, $178 for US, £137 for Rest of World. Airfreight and mailing in the USA by agent named World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Application to Mail at Periodicals Postage Prices is Pending at Brooklyn NY 11256.
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to SFX, World Container Inc., c/o BBT 150-15 183rd St, Jamaica, NY 11413, USA.
Subscription records are maintained at Future Publishing, c/o Air Business Subscriptions, Rockwood House, Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex, RH16 3DH. UK

We are committed to only using magazine paper which is derived from responsibly managed, certified forestry and chlorine-free manufacture. The paper in this magazine was sourced and produced from sustainable managed forests, conforming to strict environmental and socioeconomic standards.

All contents © 2024 Future Publishing Limited or published under licence. All rights reserved. No part of this magazine may be used, stored, transmitted or reproduced in any way without the prior written permission of the publisher. Future Publishing Limited (company number 2008885) is registered in England and Wales. Registered office: Quay House, The Ambury, Bath BA1 1UA. All information contained in this publication is for information only and is, as far as we are aware, correct at the time of going to press. Future cannot accept any responsibility for errors or inaccuracies in such information. You are advised to contact manufacturers and retailers directly with regard to the price of products/services referred to in this publication. Apps and websites mentioned in this publication are not under our control. We are not responsible for their contents or any other changes or updates to them. This magazine is fully independent and not affiliated in any way with the companies mentioned herein.

If you submit material to us, you warrant that you own the material and/or have the necessary rights/permissions to supply the material and you automatically grant Future and its licensees a licence to publish your submission in whole or in part in any/all issues and/or editions of publications, in any format published worldwide and on associated websites, social media channels and associated products. Any material you submit is sent at your own risk and, although every care is taken, neither Future nor its employees, agents, subcontractors or licensees shall be liable for loss or damage. We assume all unsolicited material is for publication unless otherwise stated, and reserve the right to edit, amend, adapt all submissions.

"Just spotted somebody selling a coffin on Facebook Marketplace"

ipso. For press freedom with responsibility

Widely Recycled

FUTURE
Connectors. Creators. Experience Makers.

Future plc is a public company quoted on the London Stock Exchange
(symbol: FUTR)
www.futureplc.com

Chief Executive Officer **Jon Steinberg**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial and Strategy Officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

LOOK! WHO'S BACK... DOCTOR WHO

BEHIND THE SCENES SECRETS!

THE UMBRELLA ACADEMY
THE FINAL SEASON

BORDERLANDS
THE LATEST GAME TO GO LIVE ACTION

DEADPOOL & WOLVERINE
CAN MARVEL STRIKE BACK?

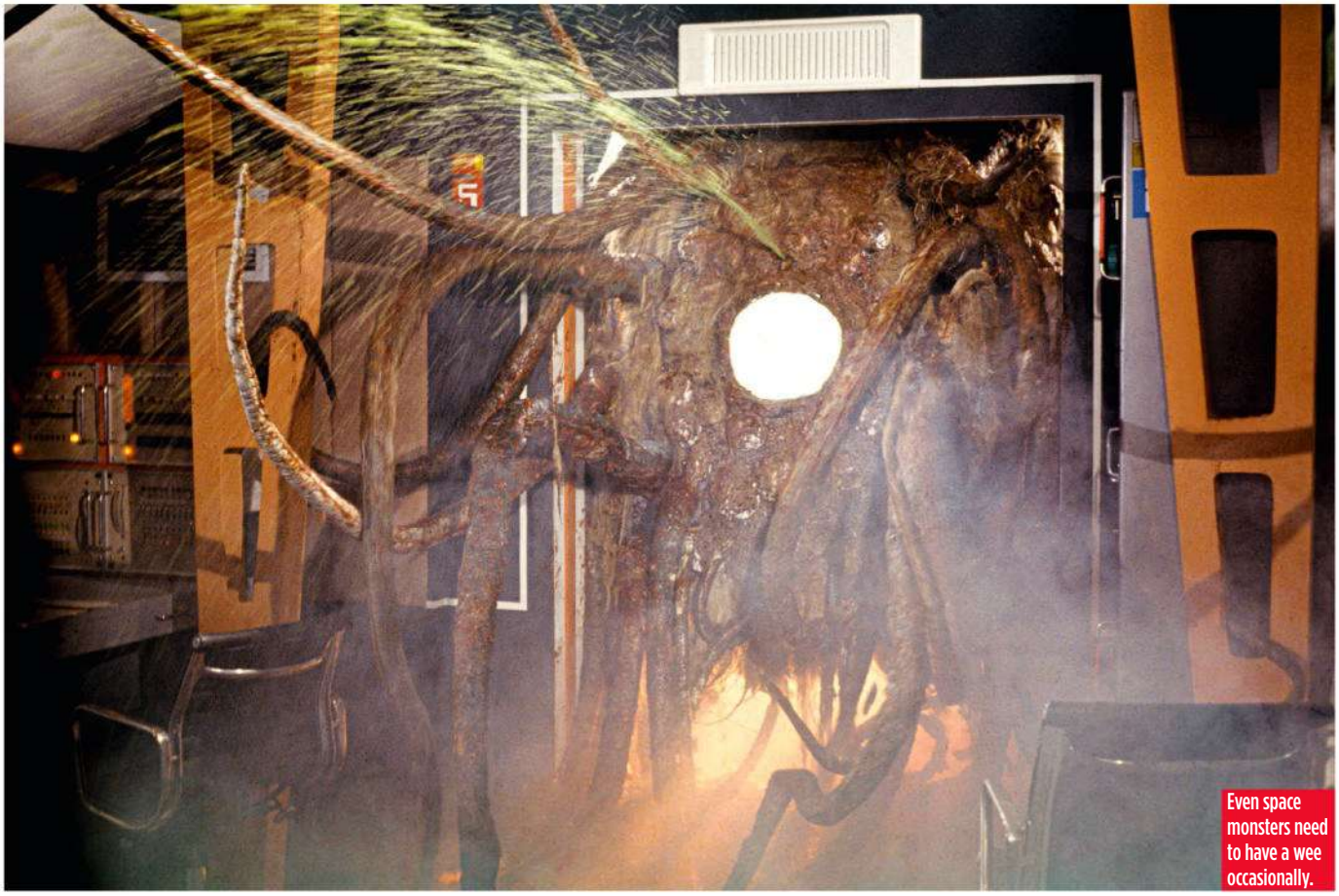
PLUS! REBELS! ALIENS! BANDITS!

All contents are subject to change, as approved by Triad Industries

Sign up to our monthly newsletter to receive a sneak preview! bit.ly/SFXnewsletter

Total Recall

Personal recollections of cherished sci-fi and fantasy



Even space monsters need to have a wee occasionally.

Space: 1999's "Dragon"

Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor

It can be embarrassing confessing what scared you as a kid. For example, I was terrified by *Doctor Who*'s Nimon – look, blokes in bull masks tottering about on platform boots are scary when you're six. But I feel no shame about shivering at the thought of "Dragon's Domain". *Space: 1999* was often rather po-faced and dull. But this season one episode descends into full-on horror, and has a Lovecraftian abomination at its heart.

It centres on Tony Cellini, a never-before-seen character who, five years ago, went on a deep space mission, discovering a graveyard of spaceships. Inside one of them: a hideous, screeching, tentacled monstrosity, capable of hypnotically drawing victims towards it. When the crew of Moonbase Alpha encounter the same ships, light years away, Cellini must confront his mortal enemy again.

The work of production designer Keith Wilson, the creature featured tentacles made of rubber tubing covered in polystyrene, made to thrash about by blowing air through them. In a DVD commentary, producer Gerry Anderson also recalled tentacles being manipulated using wires, carefully painted and lit so they were visible as little as possible.

For me, the most frightening thing about the monster was how rapidly it consumes its prey – seconds after people are drawn into its maw, it spits out their smoking skeletons, like an owl ejecting a pellet. Writer Christopher Penfold drew inspiration from a house on the Welsh border that he was too busy to visit very often: "Whenever I did get there, the spiders' webs over the kitchen windows would be full of moths and flies that had had the lifeblood sucked out of them."

Somehow, that's worse than just being eaten! Then there's the creature's mysterious nature. What the hell *is* it? How did it get there? And if it can leap across light years, what's to stop it materialising in your bedroom...?

After traumatising a generation, the Dragon met a rather ignominious end. The prop was discarded on the Pinewood backlot, and when script editor Johnny Byrne was walking his dogs, "They would always end up having a pee on the old octopus". Well, it's some form of payback for my nightmares, I guess...

Something happened to Ian, out beyond Ultra.

Fact Attack!

- **The original storyline, "Web", concerned a giant spider, and centred on a regular character – Eagle Pilot Alan Carter.**
- **Director Charles Crichton also helmed classic Ealing comedies sudh as *The Lavender Hill Mob* and *The Titfield Thunderbolt*.**
- **The office of the Commissioner to whom Cellini reports reused M's office set from *The Man With The Golden Gun*.**
- **Apparently the skulls of the victims' spat-out skeletons were put together from commercially available Revell model kits.**
- **There was a toy! (Sort of). Milton Bradley's *Space: 1999 Adventure Playset* included a small cardboard standee of the monster.**

1975 SHUTTERSTOCK

THINK YOU COULD WORK HERE? THEN CADAL WANT YOU!

CADAL

Here at Cadal we're always looking for the best of the best to help maintain our state-of-the-art offshore oil platforms.

- Handy with a generator?
- Make a mean cranachan?
- Good with the electricity?

Then we want to hear from you!

Alongside a competitive salary, Cadal offers comfortable accommodation, friendly colleagues, and a chance to explore the unknown! So find out today if you've got it what takes to be part of the Cadal crew. Enquire now!

Call 0325 39

WORLD SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION
Glasgow 2024
A Worldcon
For Our Futures
5 days of panels, concerts, plays, gaming,
workshops and so much more!
8th–12th August 2024
SEC, Glasgow
www.glasgow2024.org
@glasgowin2024